

Reflection Notes – 1/1/17

- Geoff Stevenson

Post-Christmas/Pre-New Year - Where to Now?

Here we are in the post-Christmas let-down. All the busy-ness, stress, rush and chaos is over for another year. The parties and feasting (except for New Year's Eve) are over and we are moving slowly and towards a new year. Full bellies on long hot days with little appetite for work or anything much more than lying around in front of the cricket, football or sailing – or perhaps the latest DVD or good book. These are the lazy, sultry days of post-Christmas when brains shut down and bodies collapse for at least a few days.

I wonder where Christmas has gone for everyone? The babe in the manger that was the object of our carols and who lies at the centre of the season ('Christmas') seems to have been lost, discarded amidst the wrapping paper and lunch leftovers. The baby was born and that is enough. The world still revolves on its axis and all is good for another year – after all let's not get too religiously zealous. Or perhaps it is more than that. Perhaps our cultural traditions and family expectations overwhelm the story such that we have sentimentalised and sterilised it until it offers as much as we can handle but not enough to rock the boat. It's a nice story and one we want to tell and remember but what really does it offer, this fairy tale of yesteryear when everything was different and simpler and people believed the most simplistic things – a different world.

We're about to blow our millions on New Year's Eve, another party that explodes into colour and fanfare and all-night revelry leaving a hungover world that has hailed in a new year. And what of the expectations of this new year? What do we hope for? What do we believe? In reality, probably not much. The politics will roll on in its current strange manner and we will have to wait and see if Trump is really as strange and even dangerous as they say. There will be twists and turns with our own lot, unpredictable and probably ineffective, lost in opinion polls and driven by lack of leadership and fear.

I wonder, as the night lights up on New Year's Eve, what we are hiding from. All this colour and light; all this partying. Is this expectation or is it distraction – like the parties my high school mates used to organise and allowed some to drink themselves into oblivion to hide the pain and alienation of their lives. I wonder if there isn't something of all this in our collective embrace of the superficial and sentimental through Christmas and New Year. Do we prefer to be distracted, at least for a time, with the magic of Christmas promise leading us into a simplistic world of make-believe and fun. Of course it isn't all bad, this journey into red and white gaiety of Santa and the elves, mixed with a baby born in a simple way but hailed as king, with angel chorus and all the rest. It is a lovely mixture of metaphors, images and story. But at some point the magic fades and real life intrudes and the distraction is no more and perhaps we wonder or ponder or maybe wander aimlessly into a new year much the same as the last one.

Beyond the magic and superficial pleasantries that exudes itself into the celebration, confusing the message, the story and preventing us going really deep, is the real world in which we live. The news continues each day, with presenters rattling off a list of painful stories of drownings, death, violence and world strife. The hungry are still hungry and

dying from their lack. Disasters and crises still engulf humanity and all the while, groaning beneath human consumption, the earth itself struggles against the rapidly heating world. Indigenous peoples struggle for their place and the powerful lord it over all else with their weapons of destruction and power and testosterone fuelled violent arrogance.

This is the backdrop that we don't want to see. It is there all the time, despite the beauty and wonder we adore and gather around. Our religious festivals only exude their power when they emerge within the world as that is where God always comes. The baby, so sentimentally forgotten, was birthed into a world of violence and pain. This week's story from the gospel of Matthew (Matt 2:13-23) is a dark story and it feels like we are intruding into the season of Jesus' birth with a horror story. It feels wrong because we have hidden from this reality and protected Jesus' birth from the hideous darkness of human struggle and suffering.

In this week's story we are told of the response of the powers to the birth of this innocent one. The brutal, maniacal King Herod, a cruel, power-hungry megalomaniac, as far as this story is concerned, unleashes the power of brutal violence, announcing that all children in and around Bethlehem 2 years old and younger must be killed. This is to ensure the one the Magi ('Wise Men') called the King of the Jews would be killed and not pose any threat to his kingdom. Warned of this mass murder, the family of Joseph, Mary and Jesus journey and escape to Egypt, refugees seeking safety in a world of murderous powers. All of this invites us to think of Moses and his story and the ultimate liberation of God's people into the Promised Land, a story that continues to lie at the heart of Jewish faith and memory. It also brings the story of Jesus into the world we know. Through this season of Christmas, despots across the world have wielded brutal power and refugees have sought escape to safety. The darkness of the story is the real world's story repeated over and over in every generation. It is the story we all participate in, whether as active contributors or more commonly, helpless, fearful observers overwhelmed by the sheer ferocity and unbelievable pain inflicted on human beings.

We feel the alienation of human life in our bones and long for the peace that this story proclaimed when angels announced Jesus' birth in the heavens, a memory distant and unbelievable. We long for something different, a news reel that has a different story but in our fear and confusion we miss the point. We are the ones who can and will make the difference – not them, whoever 'them' might be. It is in the very alienation and fear of our existence, the rank individualism that is prized and worshipped as the goal of 21st century western life that lies at the heart of our angst, fear and crisis. Human beings are communal and relational, not isolated individuals. When we exhibit this gross form of anti-humanity we all too easily learn to despise that one who is different and exclude that refugee or stranger, the lonely or lost, the hurting or confused, the one who reflects our own inner struggle and confronts us with the essential problem of our human vulnerability. If only we would embrace the other and look into a face different and beautiful, reflecting the face of the one born in the stable and offering another way in the world. It is Christmas still and the New Year hasn't yet begun so there is time to finally embrace the story with arms reaching out to one another and those we meet on this strange adventure called life! This vulnerable love invites us into a community of grace.