

Silent Night??

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church December 25th, 2024 –Luke :39-45 & 2:1-7)

I wonder what you see when you look at the Nativity scene which I have set up here today?

St. Francis was the first one to set up a nativity scene. He set up a simple scene in Italy in 1223 in order that people could see with their own eyes what the child of Bethlehem suffered for lack of the necessities of a newborn babe and how he lay in manger between the ox and ass.

As I ponder the nativity scene and think about all the carols we sing, I have begun to wonder about whether they truly depict the scene of that first Christmas night.

Was Bethlehem calm that night? Was it bright that night? Was it really that serene? Was it silent? Did the little baby in manger ‘no crying he make’?

Bethlehem is situated in what we now call the West Bank. The reality in the time of Jesus was that Palestine was under occupation.

People were being displaced and imprisoned for political reasons. The real reason that Mary and Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem was because a foreign power ordered them to go, in order to be registered so they would have to pay taxes to the Romans, taxes poor people like Mary and Joseph could not afford.

The King at the time – King Herod was a violent man and enraged. Worried, no doubt that the people would rise up and revolt, that is why he orders the massacre of male infants, to erase the threat of people rising up. A massacre Jesus narrowly misses as his family become refugees and flee to Egypt.

So, it is in the midst of life under a tyrant who represented a foreign occupying power, where people were ordered to leave their towns, where people were displaced, massacred and forced to become refugees that the Prince of Peace is born. It is in the midst of that chaos and suffering, that God comes to us, that God is with us.

The picture on the screen is called Christ in the Rubble. It was painted just last year and depicts a city in Palestine that has been reduced to rubble since the current conflict began in 2023 ,and in the midst of the rubble is Mary and Jesus.

I am astounded about the similarities between Palestine and Bethlehem when Jesus was born and the situation it finds itself in today.

I don't know about you, but I find this image incredibly powerful and if I am honest its depiction of Christmas is closer to the narrative we have in the gospel, than some of the songs we sing and cards we send.

Today as we contemplate the Christmas story, the story of Jesus birth that is pivotal to our faith, let's get real about it. To do so, I think, will then lead us to understanding just how amazing and miraculous the story is.

The story is not all sweetness, it is messy – an unmarried teenager pregnant and her partner is not the father, a couple forced to leave their home by an occupying force, homeless with nowhere to stay just as the child is about to be born, stuck out in a cave

with the animals, visited by rough and ready shepherds and strangers from the east. It is messy, chaotic, frightening, bloody and violent – it is anything but silent.

And that friends, is its power.

Just when the people are looking for a liberator, looking for some one to save them, wondering if God really cared about their suffering, it is then and there that God comes to them in a tangible way. It is in this way that God shows solidarity with their plight.

Mary sums up these hopes in her song. She prays the oppressors will be brought to their knees and that the lowly, the ordinary people will be lifted up, the hungry fed.

The birth of Jesus was then and is now the fulfillment of the hopes of the people, the hopes of Mary, the hopes of the Palestinians in 2024. Jesus comes to break the cycle of violence and oppression then and now. Jesus comes to show the people then and now a vision for how our life together can be lived – reconciled, forgiven, peaceful and free.

So, this Christmas as you share your table with others, as you give and receive gifts, as you say kind words to one another, remember the reality of that first Christmas, and the places in the world that are living under exactly the same kind of circumstances Jesus was born into and pray for them. Pray that the Prince of Peace might continue to be born in their midst, pray that God is with them as we sing Emmanuel – God with us.

I think that our Australian cartoonist who we lost this week, Michael Leunig, sums up the Christmas story beautifully in this poem

Love is born
With a dark and troubled face
When hope is dead
And in the most unlikely place
Love is born
Love is always born.

Wishing you all a peace filled Christmas.