

***+ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.***

The fourth Sunday of Advent bears the theme of love. We have lit a candle for each week of Advent, and we have reflected on the themes of hope, peace, joy and now love. Nothing is more surpassing than love. Today's theme of love points to God's love. It is only by knowing God's love that we can love. Love is the primary emotion. We learn love when we are born, when we are held for the first time by our mothers, exhausted from the labour of childbirth, and then when we are held by tentative fathers or partners uncertain how to handle the human life which is so small and vulnerable.

Yet it is the form of a small and vulnerable human that our Lord Jesus comes to us at Christmas in a memory of tradition so deep that even the force of modern secular trappings and commercial overlay cannot overcome it. The birth of Christ always prevails. Today's passage from the gospel of Luke gives us insight into the vulnerability and utter humanity of Jesus, and it should leave us feeling humble that God would become human because of love. It should leave us feeling even more humble as we think about the Father giving up the Son to death to make the world and its sinful people right again. All because of love. Remember the scripture, 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' All for the sake of love...

The passage also gives us insight into the vulnerability of Mary, the young woman called upon by the angel Gabriel who announced the news that she would bear a holy child, the Son of God. The mother also would love the Son and she would witness the crucifixion years later when the child became a man. Remember the scripture, the pronouncement of the seer Simeon to Mary when the infant Jesus was presented in the temple, 'And a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

Mary, young and unwed, with a child who was not even by the man to whom she was engaged, was at risk of being cast out from the family, left to fend for herself in streets which were cold and harsh and human life cheap. The streets are still

cold and harsh, even here in Australia. Homelessness is real and our society has failed to address the impact. When organisations like Anglicare produced nice glossy magazines reporting their year and lauding their efforts, where is the promised increase in social housing? It's not just the so-called charitable organisations linked to churches which have failed in this area. It's bigger than that. Social justice needs a larger profile across all sectors, government sectors and non-government alike. Some things have changed since the time of the holy conception of Jesus, but many things have not changed. Vulnerable people continue to be exposed to the street, and the street is as cold and hard as ever.

As we learn from the gospel of Matthew, the angel visited Joseph and encouraged him that Mary's conception was God's will via the agency of the Holy Spirit. The child will save the people from their sins. Thus, the holy family was formed. Joseph took and protected Mary from the sting and hurt of the street and claimed the caring role of father.

Mary was immensely strong. She chose to do God's will and risk shame and expulsion from her family should no one believe her words, convinced as she was that the angel was announcing to her world changing news. 'Mary, you have found favour with God. You will conceive by the Holy Spirit and bear a son whom you will name Jesus. This child will be great, the Son of God in the line of David.' Joseph was equally strong, he who also risked shame and ridicule and the taunt of infidelity against his bride to be.

Love is woven throughout this episode. It is the love of God who came in human form as a human baby that we celebrate at Christmas time. It is Mary's love for the child which endured to the cross which frames the divine story from Christmas to Easter. It is Joseph's love for Mary and Jesus which kept them safe and models fatherhood at its best. And it is Jesus' love for the people which sustains us today, even over two thousand years later.

It is sometimes hard to see love at this present time. Everyone seems more stressed and sometimes there is much more unkindness than usual this year. It's understandable given the ongoing difficulties of this year, but not nice. In addition to the restrictions created by the pandemic, we all must digitally or manually check in everywhere we go where there are people. On Friday when we went to the central market, we saw tired retail workers and irritated customers unwilling to check in at each stall as they moved along. It created a tense rather than the usual relaxed and happy atmosphere. Yet the shop workers must follow the rules and ought not be subject to abuse and irritation from customers. Where can love be found?

In addition, this year, people may be separated from family, celebrating Christmas in a very different way. More people are dealing with unemployment or reduced income. Lots of things have changed. The social change which has happened this year is enormous, and it is hard to keep up with.

More than ever do we need the love we have named today as the theme of this fourth Sunday in Advent. If a child is deprived of love and human touch the child will decline in health to the point that he or she perishes. This is how we all are before God. We need God's love to be sound and healthy. Love is an essential component of human survival. If God turns away from us, then we too will perish. Yet salvation history has shown us from the time of genesis that God keeps loving us. Even when we refuse to acknowledge that love, when we think we are doing it all ourselves, God keeps loving. And so, human beings do not perish away. We grow and thrive, and the cycles of time keep turning.

And God sent the Son to become human, conceived by the young woman Mary by the Holy Spirit. The word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have beheld his glory. Christmas is near to us now. Let us pray, give thanks, rejoice, and let us love as God has loved us.