

Thank you for joining St James at this Christmas. We're meeting in a way that has become familiar to us in 2020. It's good to be able to share with you this day and at the same time recognise that meeting face-to-face would also have been the wish were covid conditions otherwise.

Which leads me to begin with three remarks. One global. One local. One personal.

Global

If you are watching this from beyond our shores then we are acknowledging that the global scene is a fragile one. We have a shared humanity that says we would not want to move through this Christmas season without being mindful of the significant challenges to health and livelihoods our world is facing.

Our hopes and prayers are with those who suffer, the courageous health workers seeking to care for them, and for governments guiding their citizens through these trouble times.

Local

For those of us who are local, we are mindful of our neighbours who have been in lockdown in the Northern Beaches. For the disruption and dashed hopes of Christmas.

We recognise the sacrifice you are undertaking for the benefit of the wider community. We commit to ensuring each other's well-being with our own actions and habits, working towards minimising the covid threat on our city and state.

Personal

And thirdly, we want to recognise that the challenges of this year will have a personal toll. To physical and mental health. Those who are in isolation because of covid demands. Those feeling the grief of loneliness or lack of purpose. And many of us not being able to be with those we love.

Christmas could make us feel even more vulnerable. If that's you we urge not to bottle it up but to seek help. A family member, friend, neighbour.

Contact us if that's helpful. Our website has contact details. We've also listed support that is available. A link called Covid Resources is accessible from our home page.

Global. Local. And personal. That's also the message of Christmas that comes to us in Luke Chapter 2 we read just a moment ago. The 21 verses appear to divide neatly into three parts.

A Global decree in vv 1-7. Local news in vv 8-14. A Personal Promise in vv 15-21.

A Global Decree

Given that Christmas generally focus on a child in a manger the account in Luke's begins in unusual style.

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. Everyone went to their own town to register.

2020 has been marked by the need to return to our home towns. Or being told we're not allowed to leave them. In the Roman census you returned to your home town to register your citizenship.

Must have been a massive exercise for the Empire. Yet Luke records this global decree so that we might take note of God's design. On this global stage an inconspicuous young couple make their way back to a seemingly unnoticeable town in the region of Judea.

Luke tells us what we need to know about this family. Joseph. Of the line of King David. Something royal about his lineage. Bethlehem is the town of David. Something special about this town.

Mary. Pledged to be married to him. Already pregnant. Remarkably through the work of the Holy Spirit. Luke's first chapter lets the cat out of the bag saying this is all by God's design.

A son. They'll call Jesus. Son of God no less. To inherit the throne of his descendant David. A Kingdom that will never end.

Apart from that this family is pretty much unnoticed. Given what we now know we probably would have had a drone following them.

God's global design leads to some local news.

Local News (vv 8-14)

Shepherds minding their flocks get the shock of their lives in v 9. Luke literally says they're frightened with a great fear. They're not just shocked. They're shaken.

And while we're busy wondering what angels look like Luke says it's the message that matters:

I bring you good news of great joy for all people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

The child who has been born to Mary is a Saviour for the shepherds. In fact this is good news for all people. The local news will have global reach.

Of course you might be listening today and finding this all a bit hard to believe. Then you'll know something of how the shepherds felt.

Christmas has lots of the things we find easy to believe. Good things To be thinking about others. To give presents. To be reaching out to family and friends. We believe that so importantly the Covid restrictions really are causing us a grief.

God knows the news about a Saviour for all people is hard to believe. Hard for the shepherds then. Hard for people now.

So he gives the shepherds a sign. V 12:

You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

The sign is followed by a signing off. Angels fill the sky with a message that says God of heaven has entered the world. The heavenly host is actually a heavenly army. To bring a peace that the world could never achieve.

A global decree. Local news. And thirdly, a personal promise.

A Personal Promise (w 15-21)

The shepherds go to Bethlehem and find the baby in the manger. The whole point of these verses is captured in v 17:

When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.

And we have been doing so ever since.

God fulfils his promises. A Saviour has been born for all people. He is Christ the Lord. God's chosen one. Saving us from sin and delivering us into Jesus' lasting Kingdom.

I think one of the most significant challenges about reaching the end of this disrupted and dislocated year is asking what we have learnt from it. I would not be surprised if we all just feel too tired to even consider the question.

Here is one reflection that came home to me as I look at this passage in the light of this year.

Truth is not dependent on belief. One of the most disturbing trends of the Covid season is the political spin leaders have adopted at the expense of reality.

Words like fake news became a vehicle for avoiding any accountability for reality. They began to rely on belief at the expense of the truth. And we aware there have been significant and deadly consequences through uninformed responses to the virus.

I want to say to you the bible doesn't do spin. It's truth isn't dependent on our belief. The sign given to the shepherds about finding a baby in the manger isn't to justify the truth of God's plans. It's to deal with their unbelief.

It may be that having heard this new about a Saviour coming into the world who is Christ the Lord that you do not believe it. Even the bible says people don't readily believe.

But please don't confuse that with whether it's true. God always keeps his word. He fulfils his promises.

What this passage is saying is that when we recognise and receive that truth the outcome is always life-changing. The peace promised in v 14 becomes personal.

Apparently lockdown was the word of the year in Australia for 2020. We know its reality more than we wanted to.

The good news about a Saviour coming into the world is given by God to bring relief and release. To open the door to relationship with him.

I am standing by this empty crib. It is kindly put together by David, one of our members, each year for this Season. We can't come to church to see it, so I thought we'd show it here.

You'll note the crib is empty. With Mary, Joseph and Jesus, and the shepherds present we would have breached the 4 square metre rule for covid capacity.

It's empty because Jesus became a man and died upon a cross. That's empty too. And he was placed in a tomb. That's empty too. He rose from the dead and returned to heaven.

If you're seeking him, as our first reading from Hebrews declares, he's ruler of all things. He's seated in a throne. And you can only receive him as King.

It's a global truth. Local news for to you today. A personal promise of lasting peace in a troubled world.

Come seek him out.