

## Advent 3: PEACE

Isaiah 11:1-10, Mark 1:1-8 [MW20-46]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai & Wellsford, Sunday 13 December 2020

I came across this story in the newspaper one year

- as I was getting ready for Advent:

### CHAIN BANS NATIVITY SCENE

Australian fast food chain Oporto has banned one of its Sydney stores from displaying a Christmas nativity scene for fear it would offend non-Christian customers. The burger chain ordered its store in Hornsby, northern Sydney, to remove from its counter a nativity display showing Jesus in a crib. The chain's chief executive, Jeff Fisher, told the newspaper that the company supported 'generic' Christmas decorations, such as trees or tinsel, but not nativity scenes. 'We are just trying to keep a generic approach without trying to push any one religious belief,' he said.

"We're just trying to keep a generic approach ..."

- when I read that I was angry  
then I laughed, then I shook my head
- the chief executive of Oporto and others who think like him just don't get it  
you can't have a generic approach to Christmas  
there's no such animal!

Christmas is all about that baby in the stable

- as portrayed in the nativity scene that was removed  
it's in the name we give to this season:  
Christmas = Christ + mass  
Christ + communion/eucharist
- without that baby in the stable, without that nativity  
there would be no Christmas
- that's the bottom line

We have Christmas because of the baby

- the baby born in a stable in Bethlehem  
the baby who is 'God with us'

This baby who was born quietly, out the back

- because there was no room  
visited by ignored and despised shepherds and foreign kings
- but overlooked by ordinary people, rulers, priests, scholars  
and now a fast food chain!

No Jesus - No Christmas

- that's the bottom line!

Reminds me of a cartoon I once saw

- there are two women looking at a department store window  
which is beautifully decorated for Christmas
- there's a nativity scene tucked away in the corner  
and one woman says to the other:  
"That just takes the cake - the church trying to get in on Christmas!"

In “the world” it almost seems like you get ready for Christmas just after Easter!

- I'm sure the big red man comes out on posters and in shop windows earlier every year
- at the beginning of November  
I was admiring the display of Christmas decorations in one of the big stores
- I commented on how good it looked to one of the shop assistants and she said it ought to as they'd been working on it since October!  
(and I thought the beginning of November was pretty early!)

I found myself wondering, what is going on?

- why the need to get ready for Christmas so early?  
does it have something to do with  
desiring the good things the Christmas season brings?
- the happiness, celebration, festivity, being able to forget your troubles for a while?

Does putting up the Christmas decorations and displays make all this come more quickly?

- like the little boy who was told his birthday was in three more sleeps  
so that afternoon he put himself to bed and had three naps
- after the third one he came out and said: “It's my birthday now!”

People genuinely desire the good things the Christmas season seems to bring

- and the world sorely needs them ...  
peace, goodwill, sharing, generosity, welcome, friendship for all  
wonderful, wonderful things but they seem to last for such a short time

We seem to be able to manage these things for a couple of days

- like a kind of 'time out'  
then the 'real world' carries on, 'real life' kicks in again
- with its pain, ordinariness, war, suffering, humdrum routine ...

And we wonder:

- what happened to peace, goodwill, sharing, generosity, welcome, friendship for all?
- the bottom line is: we can't make that happen  
we can't have lasting peace, goodwill, joy and sharing  
without Jesus

Without Jesus

- it all becomes just another party  
fun at the time, but nothing lasting
- and a mess to clear up in the morning!

The good news is:

- God is real  
the promise is real  
Jesus is real

There is a peace, there is a joy which can last all year

- there is a hope founded on something other than twinkling lights  
gift wrap and tinsel!

A long, long, long, long time before Jesus, Isaiah promised it

- we heard some of these wonderful words in our first Bible reading  
these are words which sustained people through a desert of despair and disaster:  
One day, one day, God will be with us in an amazing way
- we may not see it, but our children will see it  
our grandchildren will enjoy it
- it is coming  
we will work and pray and it will be enough

What could possibly have that effect?

- what words could provide that kind of encouragement  
that spark of light, that twinkle in the eye, that spring in the step?

Listen again to Isaiah's words from Chapter 11, reading from the CEV

- when the Promised One comes:  
*the king won't judge by appearances or listen to rumours  
the poor and the needy will be treated with fairness and with justice*
- *leopards will lie down with young goats and wolves will rest with lambs  
calves and lions will eat together and be cared for by young children*
- *just as water fills the sea, the land will be filled with people who know  
and honour the Lord*
- *the time is coming ...*

The time is coming ...

John the Baptist announces that the time has come!

- this promised one is just about here  
all that people have been hoping and working and longing for  
for generation after generation, is finally going to be here!
- and what do people have to do to see it and be part of it?  
turn back to God
- it was that simple: turn back to God  
that's the bottom line

Turn back to God

- *love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind  
and love others as much as you love yourself*

Prepare the way says John the Baptist

- not with Santas and sleighs, lights, tinsel and trees, perhaps rather like this:

A pious father always closed grace for the evening meal with these words: "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest and bless what thou hast provided." "Papa," said the little son, "every evening you ask Jesus to come and be our guest, but he never comes." "My son," replied the father, "we can only wait. But we know that he will not despise our invitation." "Well, then," asked the little fellow, "if we expect him to come and have dinner with us, why don't we set a place for him at the table?" And so to save further embarrassing questions, the father permitted the boy to set a place at the table. Just then a knock came at the door. When they opened it a poor helpless waif stood shivering in the cold. The son thought for a moment and finally said, "I guess Jesus couldn't come today, and so he sent this poor boy in his place." With little further conversation the little beggar boy was brought in and set at the empty place at the dinner table.

And what does our so-called enlightened, politically correct  
- multi-cultural twenty first century seem to want to do?  
take the chair away  
and set no place at the table for the central character

Imagine *Lord of the Rings* without Frodo  
- the seven dwarves without Snow White  
*Peanuts* without Snoopy  
- it just can't be done  
it wouldn't be the same!

Taking away a nativity scene because it might be offensive to some is offensive to me!  
- but okay, fine, if you're going to do that  
then don't take the holiday or any of the benefits  
- people who don't want the nativity in Christmas have to get real  
recognise the bottom line  
- if you don't like the reason, you can't have the season!  
which is why I like the fridge magnet we were given, which says:  
Don't become an atheist - you'll have no holidays

John the Baptist's bottom line is simple, no-nonsense, hard hitting, down to earth stuff  
- turn back to God  
prepare to receive the one who is coming to fulfill the promise  
make sure you're part of it

My bottom line is I'd still celebrate Christmas even if it was not a holiday  
- even if it didn't have all the events and gifts  
it's that important

It's that important that in the church Christmas is our event  
- and we take four weeks to prepare for it  
while in the world, which seems to want to throw out the reason behind Christmas  
it takes two and a half months to prepare ...  
... you've got to wonder

I'll leave you with this thought:

In 1925 the *New York World* magazine celebrated the birthday of Abraham Lincoln with a cartoon that has become something of a classic. Two Kentucky farmers are pictured talking over a picket fence. One asks, "Anything new happen lately?" The other responds, "Nothing much. A new baby was born over at Tom Lincoln's place, but nothing much ever happens around here."

I'm sure there were folks who said the same thing in Bethlehem on the night Jesus was born. I can picture them - can't you? - standing on the corner, just outside the inn. "Anything new happen around here?" "Nope, just a baby born down in the stable. Nothing much ever happens around here."

And the bottom line ...  
- nothing much ever happens around here ... are you sure about that???  
Advent positively prods us to keep watching  
to keep looking, and not just in the usual, expected places  
- because one thing we know for sure  
is there is no such thing as a generic approach to Christmas!