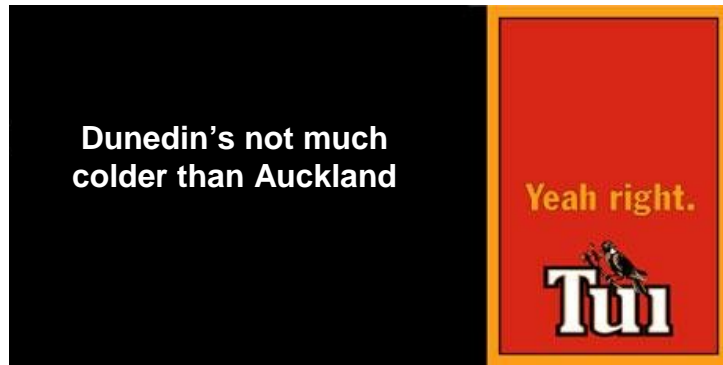


20th December 2009 – Rev Andrea McDougall

Well this is my farewell sermon as part of the staff team here, as next year I'll put on my tea cosy and head off for Dunedin to study more theology!



In some ways I am perhaps in a bit of denial about what it's going to be like in Dunedin

As I've been thinking lately about leaving, I've been feeling a bit like St Paul - not being shipwrecked, but I can't help thinking of the way many of the letters in the Bible begin: Such as Philippians 1:3 "every time I think of you I give thanks to my God"

When Iain started here a few months ago, he asked the staff what we thought were the strengths of St George's. One after the other, we said the people.

There are many things that I have to be thankful for.

I thank God for the love for Jesus and the desire to follow Christ in every aspect of our lives that I have seen and can see amongst you. I thank God for the depth of prayer and Christian commitment here. I thank God for the desire I see in people here to show God's love by caring for people here and overseas in their broken-ness and in their poverty. I thank God for the love for God shown in many aspects of worship, and for the love for Scripture which is evident here. For the open-ness to new possibilities For the many opportunities to be with you, to minister to you and be ministered to by you. And for the great people on the staff team – love for Jesus, creativity, commitment.

But before we reflect on the readings, let's bow our heads in prayer.

Lord God,

as we reflect on your words to us in the Bible readings that we've heard today,

we ask you to help us to understand and receive something more of the height, the depth, and the breadth of your love for us which is ours in Jesus Christ.

May your Holy Spirit dwell in us,

and help us to grow in love for you and others.

We ask these things through our saviour, Messiah, and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

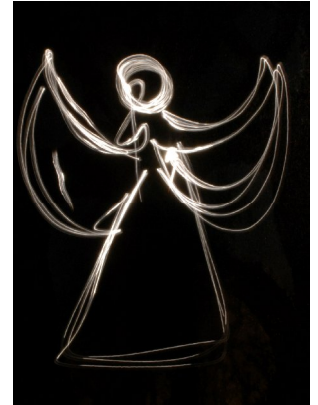
The angels appeared to the shepherds, who unlike NZ sheep farmers were a fairly rough group of people. They were considered so unreliable that their testimony was not valid in a court of law.



It was night time, and the shepherds were guarding their sheep, taking turns to stay awake to protect them from wild animals, from thieves, or perhaps even just from wandering off.

The angel brings a message from God to the shepherds and to us. For the Christmas story is not just a story about events in the past; It affects you and me here and now. It's a story that's also about us, and about each person we meet.

Through the angel, God says to us: "Don't be afraid! I have good news for you, which will bring great joy to everyone. The angel doesn't just bring comfort, but brings great joy, The good news that (Luke 2:11) This very day in King David's hometown a Savior was born for you. The angel says this not just to the shepherds, but to each of us and to all people, regardless of who we are, or whether or not we understand the message, or whether or not we are good religious people. The first Christmas happened for your benefit and for mine.



Jesus brings this offer of salvation to all, simply because we all need him. He brings this offer to all because he is the son of God who is the father of us all.

Jesus is our saviour who stands by us, who alone can rescue us from our predicament of broken-ness, misery, sin, and death. Through him we come to know God's love. Through him we are being made whole. Through him we know eternal life.

He has brought about our salvation "free of charge, without our deserving and without our assistance. All we are asked to do is to stretch out our hands, to receive the gift, and to be thankful, to live lives of thankful response.

Jesus is the Christ, who is chosen and empowered by God to be our saviour. Jesus is the Lord, for God did not send someone else to save us, but loved us so much that Jesus, who from the beginning is himself God, comes to us. Because of his boundless love for you and for me, God did not remain in heaven but came to earth. Christ was truly God, but he did not try to remain equal with God, Instead, for us, he emptied himself and became like one of us. (Phil 2:7)

For a brief time,
God who created the universe was lying in an animal's feeding trough.

As the angel had said, the shepherds found Christ the Lord
"wrapped in strips of cloth and lying on a bed of hay."



Reflecting on the Christmas story, I was struck by the two groups of people that God chose to lead to the newborn Jesus. There were the wise men who were very wealthy, very well educated, and well-travelled. Then there were the uneducated shepherds, who weren't dressed in fine clothes and probably needed a wash, who were able to be inspired that God sent the angels to invite to witness the birth of their and our Saviour, Messiah, and Lord.

We learn to see things the way that God does if we do not pay attention to where people live or the labels on their clothes or the car they drive or the money in their bank account.

Jesus came to the great and to the humble. He came to the poor workers and to the rich scholars. We are to take the message of Christ, the love of Christ to all.



Jesus was equally at home with shepherds and wise men, with prostitutes and society's leaders. It was through showing love and acceptance, through showing God's mercy and forgiveness to people living broken lives that Jesus enabled people to change.



This thought has kept coming to me all year. We often talk and sing of the amazing love which God has for us. Nothing I could do could make God love me more and nothing I could do could make God love me less. We often talk about the forgiveness which God offers - costly to God but freely available to us; the wonderful grace that gives what we don't deserve

The one thought I'd like to leave you with is this:

Let's show to others grace, mercy, patience, and kindness, in the same measure that God shows us.

Let's love others as Jesus loves us

Lets live our lives so that people leave us feeling loved not judged.

Let's forgive others as God forgives - graciously, - not keeping a record of all the wrongs, - enabling a new start

At Christmas we remember that "the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness."

Lets go to others,
with that same love and faithfulness,
to tell of what God has done for them in Christ,
to show them God's love and ours.

I would like to close with a prayer from Ephesians 3

May Christ make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. May your foundation be in God's love and keep you strong. ¹⁸ And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. ¹⁹ May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life that comes from God.