

December 22/12/2019

## Advent Love

We began our Advent season with Josh looking at hope – the light of Christ’s hope in the world and the way we can be beacons of God’s hope in the darkness. Then Gareth explored Advent peace – our communities and loved ones are crying out for peace in the midst of crippling anxiety, a peace that is so much more than a cessation of hostilities but is about restoration and reconciliation, healing and wholeness. Last week we heard from Jeremy Woods, our St John’s college ordinand- in training. He shared about the theme of Advent joy. There is so much to be joyful about in the Christmas story but also so much to deeply lament – just as we experience today. A truly Christian joy is not afraid of tears and acknowledges the pain we suffer, and responds to tragedy with compassion.

And today I’m going to share a few thoughts on this final week of Advent, before we celebrate Christmas, looking at Advent love.

What a list of virtues we have traversed. Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. But this is not the only list I’m sure you’ve encountered in this season. Whether it’s a Christmas card address list, lists of awards at school or uni, lists of things to pack and take care of for going away on holiday, lists in the media as they begin their annual review of the year, or my most prized and daunting lists.

- Christmas present purchasing list
- Shopping List

Funnily enough these two lists represent love to me at Christmas time.

The Christmas present purchasing list tells me all of the people whom I love and are dear to me, people whom I value their relationship and I want to offer them a gift which represents that relationship.

And the supermarket shopping list represents the hospitality that I want to share in, most often with those very same people!

Do you have any lists running in your life at the moment?

There are two lists that we don't often mention as part of the biblical account of Jesus' birth. I didn't choose them for the readings this morning because I didn't want our wonderful readers to go on strike and they're not the most dynamic portions of scripture to be read aloud. But I think they reveal something of the character of God's love for us.

They are the genealogies of Jesus, found in Matthew's Gospel, chapter 1 and Luke's Gospel chapter 3. They detail through the generations the whakapapa of God's son, the people in whom God's presence dwelt and by whom God's will for his people was proclaimed. They are heavily stylised in their structure, oozing with symbolism, possibly not able to stand up to scrutiny of forensic genealogists, but nevertheless, they carry an important message about God's relationship with us.

Because as we read through these genealogies there are some fascinating people we encounter. I want to reiterate again, just how absolutely stunning it is, in a patriarchal society of Jesus' time, and earlier, to find women prominently listed in his genealogy. And not just any noble women. There's Tamar, a widow of multiple husbands, and a foreign refugee fleeing famine called Ruth, and to top it off, Rahab, an enemy prostitute. They are all commended in Matthew's gospel as foremothers of Jesus. The men too are a motley crew. The list includes kings and priests, prophets and drunks, murderers and adulterers, alongside ordinary faithful people. When I read about these people I am reminded again that no one is beyond God's love. No one is beyond God's mercy and redemption. All of these men and women have deeply moving, real and challenging stories. When I read the lists of Jesus' whakapapa, I am struck again at how inclusive God is. God chooses some pretty unlikely characters to partner with in His great restoration project of the world. God's love isn't limited to those who have got their lives sorted. I love how Luke places his genealogy list straight after Jesus' baptism. It's as if to say, God has affirmed who Jesus is, now look at all these people who can also lay claim to forming Jesus to be who He is.

Because Jesus' story doesn't begin at Christmas. These people create a backdrop to Jesus' life that is the climax of God's loving activity in the world. Yes God's son was born on Christmas night, but part of what makes the Christmas story so powerful is the full depth and breadth of it, the history, the characters. Imagine tuning in to one episode of an award winning TV show, *The Crown*, perhaps, and then imagine how much more you

would enjoy watching all the seasons from the start, journeying with the characters, knowing the backstory and experiencing their lives over time.

Other characters in the story of Jesus' birth also serve to deepen our understanding of God's love. Knowing the struggles and faithfulness of Elizabeth and Zechariah, Jesus' aunt and uncle and their journey of infertility. Knowing the turmoil Joseph felt in the face of the scandal dumped upon him and his honourable character. Knowing the patience of Anna and Simeon, in their old age, waiting for the Messiah that had been promised in their lifetime.

These people all formed a tapestry of God's faithfulness to humankind. And so returning to my Christmas present purchasing list. I feel similarly about the people I write down to buy a present for. Each of these people help me to understand how to love and be loved. Family members who have journeyed together through illness and difficult work situations. Friends who are now far away and I miss them. People who have supported my family as we have adjusted to a new baby in our midst. Like Jesus' lists and the people surrounding the nativity scene, we understand more richly God's love for us by the people who love us and shape us.

In the midst of the busyness of this season where are you experiencing that love? Who is with you, celebrating, supporting, holding you? As you take some time to pause this morning, look back over 2019. There have been some huge events, both catastrophic and jubilant. Who has stood with you this year?

Finally, if you were writing your own genealogy, and not necessarily a genetic one, who are 5 people who would be included? How has God used them to shape you?

May you experience hope, peace, joy and above all, love, as you tackle your lists, spend time with people who show you Christ-like love and reflect on another year in God's world.

*Kate Berkley*