

SERMON – THE ANGEL SONG

Well as Lynette mentioned, last Saturday around 15 of us did a 20 km Advent walk from St G's to the Cathedral in Parnell and then a long and winding road to the top of Mt Wellington. The sacred maunga. I guess for me, it was another reminder for me, of the value of the ancient spiritual practice of Pilgrimage. Because it's such a good way to re-connect with our surroundings. To notice more keenly, our oh so familiar surroundings. And of course, discover new things about our surroundings. And as we stood at the peak of Mt Wellington this was another reminder for me, of how important it is in life every now and then to get the 360% bigger picture perspective of our surroundings. Because the mountain view helps all of us to see more clearly the connectedness of all things. The things we can't see from the ground. **The mountain view reminds all of us that there's more to our reality that we often see. It's a great a wisdom for life**

And this is what I've wanted to do this Christmas. I wanted to take the big picture view of the Christmas story to see what it reveals. And I'm going to do this in 2 parts. Today and Christmas eve. And I want to use 2 of my all-time fav Christmas carols as part of these reflections.

One of the things I saw even more clearly this time round, is how all the main players in this good news story of hope, receive divine visitations from the angels. The angelic presence is very strong in this story. And what really struck me, is what these visitations reveal about the nature of God. And the priorities and the purposes of God. And how does this speak into our lives.

The mountain view perspective, reminded me, that there are 2 central truths about this Christmas story that we should always remember. (1) The story of the birth of Christ is about the saving, healing, restoring purposes of God, breaking in, to a broken world. And (2) this a story that is still unfolding, for you, for me, for all humanity. It's as profoundly important for now as it was for then. Because central to our belief, is that we can all be involved in God's redeeming purposes.

Its why on our Advent walk when it came to the meditation I was leading, I read out the words from one of my all-time favourite Christmas Carols, **'It Came upon the midnight clear'**. The words have a beautiful poetic quality that provokes our imaginations, and what the whole song celebrates is the power of the angelic presence. The angel song reminding humanity, that Christmas night is about the redeeming purposes of God breaking into a broken world in Christ. Listen to these words of the first verse...

**It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old,
From angels bending near the earth, to touch their harps of gold:
"Peace on the earth, goodwill to all, From heaven's all-gracious King.
"The world in solemn stillness lay, To hear the angels sing.**

A reminder to all of us, that this angelic presence, this divine prompting is always near. Always reminding us that we're all involved in these healing purposes. The story is still unfolding. From the 2nd verse.

**STILL! through the cloven skies they come, ('cloven' meaning the darkened clouds parted)
With peaceful wings unfurled, And still their heavenly music floats over all this weary world.**

Now I have to be honest and say that when I was first exploring Christianity via Alpha and in the early years, I always felt a little sceptical when I read about the appearances of the angels in the Christmas story. Like many people outside of faith, talk of angels seemed to belong to the world of fantasy and make believe. But then I began to have my own personal experiences of an angelic

presence, which may be different for all of us. I would describe it, as an experience of a divine visitation that imparts to me a deeper wisdom, a deeper conviction, or a deeper sense of calling but always with a sense of divine guiding. In my experience this can be very dramatic as in the Christmas story, but also as in our carol a sense of divine presence around us. But what is the hallmark of this divine presence and guiding? Because it's important to test it! Well, it's just like the people in the Christmas story. **It always leads us to Christ.** And for me personally, I find a deeper peace instilled in my heart. The peaceful wings unfurled into my life.

Now I have no problem with this truth of the angelic presence. In fact, the older I get, I'm even more convinced that divine visitations and guidance in the small details of our lives is a spiritual reality. The ***heavenly music of the angels is always bending near, floating over this weary world.*** They are always playing their divine song of justice, peace, mercy and compassion. We just need to take the time to listen more closely and more often to their angel song.

**And man, at war with man, hears not - the love-song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye humans of strife, and hear the angels sing.**

So let's take a few minutes to put aside our strife and hush the noise of our lives... to listen more close to the love song they bring. I want to offer **2 brief Advent reflections on what we see revealed about God's purposes and priorities in these angelic visitations. Then ask... how can all this speak into the everyday reality of your life and mine?**

MY FIRST REFLECTION IS THIS ... GOD VISITS PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE IN THEIR LIVES AND THROUGH DIFFERENT CHANNELS. All the participants involved in this Christmas story are busy going about their ordinary lives when the angelic presence tells them they are to be part of God's healing purposes.

Zechariah is a Priest.... going about his religious duties, when he receives his divine visitation at the incense altar.

With Mary there's no specific location given. The angelic presence comes in the mundane movements of her everyday very young life.

Joseph receives his visitation in a dream. Now most of our dreams are instantly forgotten but how many of you, have had vivid and powerful dreams that stay with you for days. I know I have. But how many of us have done what Joseph did? Act upon the wisdom received, (the love song) and take serious risks, in order, to do the right thing?

The Shepherds are in their workspace. A rugged often dangerous landscape in the wild, where they scrape a living caring for their flock. It's also the landscape that shapes and forms their whole way of being AND their lowly position in society.

Which brings us to the Magi, and the Magi really fascinate me. For one thing, they are as far removed from the shepherds in terms of the social strata as it's possible to be. And there's actually nothing in scripture that tells us they received a divine visitation that prompts them to make this crazy journey. But think about it! Would these educated, wealthy people from a different race and tribe, risk everything to travel across borders and boundaries to bring gifts to a new-born baby they believe is the anointed one without some-kind of a divine prompting? Especially when we're told that after giving the gifts to Jesus, they receive a **'warning in a dream'.** **Do not go back to Herod, return home by a different route.** And they follow this divinely inspired intuition. As they did with the light of the star.

So what does this tell you and I about God 's nature and purposes? Because what I see, is a God who chooses people from a whole cross section of humanity to participate in God's redeeming purposes. And their daily endeavours are very much part of this. This is the word becoming flesh. How might this speak into your daily endeavours. How might you be more open to the sense of the divine guiding and leading?

Which brings me to my second and final reflection on what these divine visitations reveal about God's purposes. For me it's this. OUR ORDINARY EVERYDAY ENDEAVOURS HAVE SACRED VALUE AND SACRED WORTH. The saving, healing purposes of God are not somehow separate from our supposedly ordinary everyday existence.

- In Mary and Joseph, we see that motherhood and fatherhood have sacred value. I love the way Chris pointed out last week, how the noble qualities of Mary and Joseph as parents, would have helped shape and form Jesus Christ in HIS most important formative childhood years.
- In Zechariah and Elizabeth, we see that age doesn't have to mean we lose hope and purpose and feel barren. We may think our best and most productive days are behind us. But God may surprise us. Being productive, being fruitful may simply take on a different expression and meaning. After all, Jesus spent far more years of his life being a carpenter, cutting and shaping wood, than he did being the Messiah.

So what about you? Are you currently in a transition stage of life? How might the Christmas story encourage you to see how meaning and purpose takes on a different expression.

- My mum and dad in the UK are 90 and 88 years old, and life's incredibly tough for them both physically. But they inspire all of us with their love and devotion to each other. And their daily courage to find meaning and purpose in difficult circumstances shapes all of us in our own understanding of how we find meaning in our lives. This is their fruit. And we must never forget that all of our understandings, and all of our human endeavours, exists within the eternal perspective.

I want to finish by dovetailing the final words from our youth kids and families Postcards from the Magi video. Because I loved the way they captured the sense of anticipation of the birth of Christ.

Mary and Joseph are arriving in Bethlehem from their long and challenging journey, as are the Magi. The Shepherds are in place. The Angel Choirs are warming up and the World holds its breath because the invisible God is becoming visible! All of these people from their ordinary lives are converging, they are all caught up in God's redeeming purposes.

So as we all travel together this final week to Christmas ...

- **How can their journey speak into your journey?**
- **What might it look like for you to know the angelic presence in your everyday endeavours?** Divine encouragement that your endeavours have sacred value and worth in God's redeeming purposes?

I'll leave you with these words from the last verse of our carol. Beautiful words that sing of our Christian hope birthed at Christmas. That one day all will be redeemed. All will be restored. All will be made new. And we can be part of this story ...NOW

**For lo!, the days are hastening on, By prophet bards foretold,
When with the ever-circling years ... Comes round the age of gold**

**When peace shall over all the earth, Its ancient splendours fling,
And the whole world gives back the song, Which now the angels sing.**