

Sermon for Christmas 2018

Merry Christmas to you all.

Today we celebrate that God is with us - born into the human family in flesh and blood.

In the simple story of the birth of Christ in the stable, all the complexities of life are hushed, for the promise of God to come to us in person has been fulfilled.

Now remembering that God keeps his promises and that we can trust in him can be a difficult task in this world of constant change and different thought processes.

So today I thought I would ground us in the faith beliefs from some of the saints and holy people of past centuries and highlight how the simplicity of their faith flowed from the beauty, mystery and love of God born into this world at Bethlehem.

From their spiritual writings and poetry, we first notice that many of them tell the Christmas story of Jesus birth not in terms of God's response to our need as sinful people – but from a perspective that goes further back to the original purpose of God, which is to share the joy of the intimacy of God's relational love with us who he created.

The 16th Century Spanish holy man, St John of the cross wrote beautiful poetry in which he expressed his understanding of the birth of Jesus as the marriage between heaven and earth.

For John, Gods purpose to come among us was to ensure that God and humanity could eat bread together at table, thereby giving us the opportunity to recognize in Jesus face, our own true nature and destiny and sense the joy of God in our everyday life. Our natural rhythm would then be reborn and flow outwards creating and recreating time after time.

And I believe we can connect with this way of love when, in our own lives, we do a loving deed and, with the recipient, feel the goodness, which in turn can lead to other good deeds and continue to flow out and transform on its journey. This, of course is the perpetual movement or activity of love.

Many of the holy people from past times expressed their faith belief in terms of union – that is, union with God, each other and the creation. St Hildegard of the 12th Century taught about the union between humanity, the planet, the cosmos and God.

She wrote and preached about the delicate harmonious nature of the natural world and how good stewardship is essential for its balance, not only for provision of its bounty – but for our own balance in body, mind and spirit. She professed that all is connected and when one suffers, all suffer. And as we know this is an issue that we still grapple with today. In Hildegard's poem *Limbs of Christ* the gentle flow of her words express how God gave birth to the son in heaven before the creation, and birth to him on the earth so that we would share in his joy and bliss as his living body.

St Francis of Assisi from the 13th Century is a very popular Saint who lived his life in relationship with God and all of creation and is known for his purity of heart and prayerful life.

He is best known, however, for his tender, companioning love of the animal world. He was also responsible for the first nativity scene. Having borrowed animals from his friend he set up a scene to present Jesus Christ's birth in Bethlehem. St Francis believed the nativity scene would help people imagine they were present at the birth of Jesus and thereby place their faith in the baby born in a simple manger who could make **all** the difference in their lives.

Another reputed holy person was Julian of Norwich of the 14th Century. Julian is best known for her saying "all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well." These simple words written so long ago can still lift the heart when darkness threatens to overcome. With these words however, Julian did not suggest, in some sort of blind hope, that "tomorrow all things would be better", but that ultimately God's will shall be worked in all of creation and that even in the present time God's love and mercy is at work in us. Dame Julian saw humanity as the gift by the Father to the Son before all time, and in Jesus birth - our re-creation in him.

The focus on God's relational love as the purpose for the birth of Jesus by these holy people, does not mean that they denied the presence of sin in the world and the need for salvation. They each lived in earlier centuries when troubled times ruled the day. They were not unaware nor untouched by the sin of the world, but they were able to rise above it - transcend it by living in confidence and trust in the one who shows us that he keeps his promises by coming among us as one of us.

What they teach us in this age, I believe, is that they had confidence in God and held fast to their simple faith not giving way to cynicism, suspicion or hopelessness. By their very lives they have shown us that the joy of Christmas is the felt presence of God with us every minute of the day and that all limitations have been overcome. The humdrum duties and events of daily life have become sacred - filled with positive implications that might once have seemed impossible.

So as we turn our gaze toward the baby in the crib, this Christmas, may we be confident, and trust that God is among us - that his relational love birthed in us invites us into the beauty, mystery and love that comes with being part of him as he is part of us.

God's blessings be upon each of you and your families this holy and sacred Christmas.

The Lord be with you.