

Hard Road

Various readings

Some of you have travelled considerable distances to be here, and I want to welcome you to St Paul's Box Hill. My own son and about-to-be daughter-in-law have made their way safely from Adelaide, so I am pretty happy about that. But as we think about travelling, do we ever stop and wonder what it was like for the very first Christmas travellers — what it was like at *this* time, just before Christmas, as Mary and Joseph made their way to Bethlehem?

We know what we know about Mary and Joseph from the Scriptures, and we'll hear them again this evening. We speculate that they were probably very young as they made this journey, probably teenagers; and they had to traverse about 140 kms as they made their journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the place of Joseph's ancestors. Not so far, really, by our standards — not much more than if you were going on holiday to Inverloch, around about that distance. However, back in those times of our first Christmas travellers, it was a very different journey that they made.

Some speculate that it was a pretty gruelling sort of trip; perhaps, at best, they might have made about 30 km a day — there you go, five days to get to Inverloch (you'd want longer than four weeks' holiday, wouldn't you?). But it wasn't a simple trip at all, up hill and down dale. "Are we there yet?" would take on a whole new meaning, I reckon — and especially given that Mary was heavily pregnant. Perhaps they might have made, what — 15 kms a day? It's all speculation, isn't it? But it's a long, hard, arduous journey through the Judean desert. If they made that journey through the desert in their winter time, it's probably about 30 degrees in the daytime, and it rains like no one's business. One of the writers that I read said, "It's nasty, and it's miserable." This is the young family making the journey. Do you ever ponder that, sometimes? And on top of it all, when they finally get there, there's not a place for them to go to. There's no room in the inn — and we go across that particular line in the story pretty quickly sometimes, don't we? Do you ever wonder what it must have been like to be that young couple? I'd say, at the very least, that we could start to imagine some of the feelings they had: perhaps they were absolutely exhausted by the time they got to Bethlehem; perhaps they were worried — sometimes I even start to get anxious myself as I hear the story.

But I needn't be; because the wonderful reality is that, I'm sure, you and I know how the story unfolds, and indeed how it ends. And that's what we hear about tonight — that's what we proclaim tonight as we sing: that Jesus is born; that Jesus is God's rescue plan for you and for me, born in a humble stable manger.

But there's even more on this fourth Sunday of Advent (that's what today still is, even as we have our first Lessons and Carols service). As we hear the coming birth of Jesus first announced to Joseph on *this* day by the angel, he's told that the one who comes will be called Immanuel, which means "God with us". And the reality is that he surely was with that couple on the journey that they made; and the reality is, as you hear the words in your ears and as they filter down into your heart this season, that Jesus is with you. And he promises that he always will be.

So sing well — tell the story; hear it; and live it. Immanuel, God is with us. Amen.