

The Shadow of the Cross at Christmas

Matthew 2:13-23

European Christmas carols sing of cold, starry nights and snow. The re-creation of an English Christmas dinner with hot turkey, roast potatoes and steamed pudding in our 40-degree heat, preceded by an appearance of a sweat-drenched Father Christmas, continues to try the endurance of cooks and of families.

This year, the contrast between the European story of Christmas and its Australian circumstances has cut even deeper. Bushfires have taken lives, destroyed properties, and spread smoke and ash over cities. Even holiday-makers who leave the city for the seaside and the country will cautiously study the weather forecasts and listen for fire alerts. [This week, from eastern Victoria we hear of an entire township and all its tourist visitors sheltering on the lakeside beach, ready to leap into the water for safety — but thankfully, the wind turned.]



The theme of the first Christmas was one of hope and joy. It seems like a strong contrast — behind the bushfires this year lurks anxiety about the future of Australia, and indeed of the world. Are the extreme temperatures, drought, and destructive fires of this Christmas a preparation for a man-made world to come of merciless sunshine and burning?

However, the overlap of Christmas with fear and loss is not foreign, but is part of the original Christmas story. The bushfires that lap at Christmas this year remind us that Jesus came to light a fire in humankind's hearts — a furnace of refiner's fire, in which humanity is refined by his sufferings and death.

The manger scene is only one part of the salvation story. This is a place of birth, of family gathered in relative safety (if not in total comfort). Lights of hope and joy are lit — but this scene is not far from the world's agenda of control and conquest. Of government-enforced census and taxation, of limited rights, and the fear of oppression and disaster just around the corner.

Though we are privileged, our homes at Christmas, too, are not immune from sadness and loss. The reminders of those no longer present; the uncertainty of health or employment; even the risk of home invasion, of the threat of loss by fire or some other natural disaster: these all can produce fear and anxiety.

The pronouncement of the arrival of God's son to the shepherds is a promise given that looks beyond his birth, through his name Jesus given at his birth, to the death that brought salvation to the human race. That is the focus of the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, in which the stories of Jesus' childhood are a prelude. Jesus' path through death to rising is anticipated in Herod's attempt to have him killed, and in the sword which Simeon predicts will pierce Mary's heart.

The pain and conflict inherent in these details of the Christmas stories challenge any attempt to sentimentalise them. They are more than a celebration of family, and of the gift of a new life.

If the stories are domestic in their focus, it is because domestic situations are inherently precarious. Birth is never far from death; the peace and comforts of home are never safely distant from the terrors of violence, illness, unemployment, and fire.

The Gospel stories, including those of Christmas, test any easy faith, any easy hope, by confronting them with the loss of all that we treasure.

I was quite moved by Pastor Neville's sermon story on Dec 22 of the death of a five-year-old boy and the challenge this brought to the faith of his parents and their Christian community. I was particularly moved because I personally know Christian people who have lost children pre- and post-birth, and the hurt is raw even some 20 years later to those grieving fathers' and mothers' hearts.

Faith is challenged by our losses, and also in contending with God's perfect son seeing suffering, and abandonment by friends and even the Father.



To believe in a loving and caring God, faith must reckon with a God who allows a chosen one to be born in a stable and to be a hairsbreadth away from slaughter by Herod's soldiers. Trust in a God who promises a world that is more just must reckon with the knowledge that God allows his own chosen one to be cut to pieces by the forces of injustice.

These challenges to faith and trust can be met only by a deeper trust in a God whose love is to be found in a death. We are to embrace the child of light who is to enter the darkness and be broken by it for our sake. The babe held by the wood of the manger is the man who is destined for the wood of the cross.

So, we may weep, and our hearts still feel the pain and questions of, "Why Lord, why?" These may still wake us from our sleep; but our hearts are also convinced of our Saviour's victory through suffering. God is good, and will give us far more than we have lost in this life. Knowing his love and tender mercy, and his call to follow him in trusting obedience, brings tears — tears that anticipate his putting all things right.

The shadow of the cross was there at his birth. Jesus left his joyous heaven, and came to suffer and die for us so that even Rachel will be comforted.

Amen.