

**SERMON ADVENT 4B 2020 All Saints  
Birkenhead**

The economy has been front and centre this year due to the COVID pandemic. Remarkably the New Zealand economy has fared too badly, though there may be some more surprises down the track. Despite the uncertain economic times people have still gone out and spent their money, particularly on the housing market.

There is always a slightly uncomfortable feeling around Christmas and spending. It can put some into debt whereas others go over the top. With the hit that a lot of shops took during Covid it is possibly a good thing to support them. I don't mind if shops advertise their wares and encourage us to be generous in our giving. Even if someone is only generous once in the year I suppose that is something to be thankful for. Maybe the commercial side of Christmas can

bring out some good in us. But I must confess that each year there is some advertising which gets under my skin. It is normally when shops sell stuff saying "All you need this Christmas". The other "Everything that makes Christmas, Christmas". These sorts of slogans annoy me. Whose Christmas do they think it is? I suppose those two slogans symbolised for me what I really don't like. It's not so much the commercialism of Christmas as the jollification of Christmas that I really object to. Much advertising would lead on to believe that this happy feast is a time for general merry making which can only happen by buying more. Sometimes it suggests we have to go to great extremes of expense in order to find happiness.

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Yes of course Christmas is for celebration and joy and laughter, family and friends, generosity

and care for others. But why we celebrate may determine what we do to celebrate. For many Christmas is simply an avid demand for all of the pleasurable aspects one can fit in.

For others, Christmas will be the longest and saddest day of the year because they miss out on what they see other people enjoying. One can only wonder how the refugees of Syria or the families of victims of this year's violence will celebrate this feast. Somehow Christmas needs to speak to them too.

We often want a particular type of joy to accompany our Christmas celebration. We may look for the joy of Christmas where it doesn't reside. I think that's why some become disillusioned with Christmas when children grow up. How often I hear it said that "Christmas is really for the children."

Unfortunately we have made it so. Christmas is for all people of any age. It is also for people in any circumstances of life. The joy of Christmas is one we can always appreciate if we know what we are looking for.

Today's readings help us to see the true joy of Christmas and how we might celebrate it. These readings take us away from the sweet gentleness of the baby Jesus to the real gentleness which can be found in these stories.

The story is of Mary, discovering herself pregnant and hearing that her cousin Elizabeth is also pregnant. Mary is not married and Elizabeth is too old to have children. Immediately the ordinariness of giving birth is taken to an extraordinary level. Elizabeth senses the divine at work.

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Mary exclaims, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Elizabeth and Mary are both very aware of the presence of the divine in the human.

These ordinary human events have for them a divine significance. In this child to be born the eternal and the material will be held together. The divine and the human will co-exist. No wonder Mary is blessed. What joy for both women? Here we see true joy. Their joy is to recognise the hand of God in life. God breaks into their lives and they will never be the same again.

That's what happens when God breaks into life. It can be a disturbing experience as well as a joyful experience. We often want the joy and

celebration without the disturbance. But birth is a disturbing and painful process. The birth of a child, the birth of anything new in each of us, will be painful and disturbing.

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With the birth of the Christ Child, life on earth is disturbed. We are thrown off balance. The birth of Christ teaches us that we are to be accepting when we may want to be independent. It tells us of our incapacity when we want to feel strong. It teaches us to offer what we have when we long to hold on to our possessions. What a disturbing feast this is.

The response of Mary to God's call and the birth of her child, turns things upside down. It demands a change in our outlook. It is a birth which brings peace, but at the price of rebirth and transformation in all of us.

So our celebration will be a time of rejoicing, rejoicing at the presence of God in this birth. And our rejoicing will also have about it the expectation of something different – something disturbing. It seems that's how God works.

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God worked in that way in the life of Mary and Jesus. Life for them was not all sweetness and light. At Christmas it is good to remember the whole life of Christ. That his birth leads to death. They are two parts of the same life. In the beginning is the end.

John Donne, the great English poet and Dean of St Paul's in London, said this in one of his sermons in 1626.

“The whole life of Christ was a continual passion; others die martyrs, but Christ was born a martyr. He found a Golgotha, where he was crucified, even in Bethlehem, where he was born; for to his tenderness then, the straws were almost as sharp as the thorns after; and the manger as uneasy at first as the cross at the last. His birth and his death were but one continual act, and his Christmas day and his Good Friday, are but the evening and the morning of one and the same day.”

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Somehow John Donne was struggling, like us, to understand the joy and the pain of life. He was struggling to understand the human and the divine in life. There are no easy answers to these

questions we live with. We may not find answers to satisfy our understanding. But an answer could equally be a response. How do we respond to the joy and the pain of the world? How do we express the divine in our midst? I believe the joy of Christmas lies in the way we respond. The first response is to recognise God in life, which is what Christmas is about. And then we recognise the completeness of that life in the person of Jesus. The birth and the death of Jesus are our means of true life. Here, as in every Eucharist, Christ is born again, his presence is with us. Here Christ dies and is risen. We receive new life. That is the mystery of faith.