

## Christmas Day Reflection by Rev. Laurel Barr at Roseville Uniting Church on Christmas Day 2011

### *Christ is our peace*

#### **Luke 2:1-18**

Today I am drawn to the message of the angels of “good news of great joy for all the people” and of the angels’ song: *“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those whom he favours”*. And I wonder: What is this peace? What is this peace that comes with this child?

This all took place in a far-flung province of the mighty Roman Empire. Mary and Joseph were swept up by decree and made to travel where their Roman lords told them to go. They had to go to Bethlehem to be counted for taxation purposes. Jesus was born in an occupied territory tightly controlled by the Emperor Augustus.

Not long before this, the Roman Empire had been locked into civil war. \* it looked like it was destroying itself until Octavian, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, won a mighty naval battle. Julius Caesar had been worshipped as a god. Now his son took the name Augustus and was proclaimed the Son of God. It was written that the birth of Augustus was the beginning of a whole new world - Pax Romana. And as he united the Empire under his rule, he was called the Lord and Saviour of the world. **In this new world** dissent was efficiently and ruthlessly crushed by his military using sword and cross. Pax Romana was a peace but it was a peace brought about and kept by military force.

And the kind of world Jesus was born into is familiar. Events around the world this year tells us that. We see it in places like Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya, Bashar –al Assad’s Syria and Kim Jong Il’s North Korea. Recently, when in West Papua, Indonesia, my husband encountered military establishments who had just participated in forcibly disbanding a large demonstration of unarmed locals. People had been shot dead and outside the military headquarters signs were posted reading “Kasih dan Damai itu Indah” – “Love and Peace is Beautiful”. How ironic! Peace is beautiful in West Papua. But it is a forced peace maintained through the barrel of the gun! Is this the peace the angels proclaimed as good news of great joy for all the people?

Today we have been hearing the story of the birth of Jesus the babe born in the stable and wrapped in bands of cloth and placed in a manger. And is not he the real Son of God - the **true** Lord and Saviour of the world?

Can you see what's happening here? Incredible as it may seem at first glance, this tiny new born child directly takes on the power of the Roman Emperor. This tiny child born in a Bethlehem stable dares to question powerful rulers of his time. He challenges the kind of peace they impose.

For you see, Jesus is a different Lord and a different Saviour. Jesus is a different Son of God. Jesus is the one who brings a different peace – a peace that comes from heaven to earth in the birth of a tiny and vulnerable child.

The peace announced by the angels was not something enforced or imposed by a distant, brutal tyrant. Rather, this peace was the joyous, generous and unconditional gift of God. It was a peace born among us and in us. It was something quite extraordinary; something truly momentous. It **IS** good news to be received and to be cherished.

Friends, Pax Romana was an imposed peace from the top down. It was about being in control – leaving nothing to chance. It was about ruthless power. And this went much further than power of a military kind.

It was about the power of ideology. It was about economic power.\* It was about maintaining the power of an elite and keeping everyone else in their place - of controlling what people could think and believe - of suppressing people's longings and shaping their responses. It was about people at the top risking nothing and leaving nothing to chance.

But, you see, God does things differently. God comes to us in the baby in that manger to gift us with a peace that is not forced or imposed. It is a peace that is not brutal, jealous or controlling.

God gifts us with a peace that comes from the heart. It is a peace that works from the inside out - a peace that flows from that centre of our being where we learn to trust and to hope and to love.\*\* It is a peace out of which we enter into relationships - a relationship with God and relationships with one another. It is a peace where everyone has a place.

This is God's peace. It is given by a God come from high to totally immerse himself in the life of his people.

Friends, this is an amazing peace that offers us real joy and life. But it is a risky one. For a start, see how Jesus, in his birth, shares the precarious life of poverty of those around him at his birth –he was born in an unhygienic stable among the animals. And then, soon Jesus and his parents have to flee a massacre as refugees in order to save Jesus from the sword of King Herod.

When God came to be with us in Jesus he risked all the dangers of living in first century Palestine under the power of Augustus and his puppet king Herod. And in doing this God risked everything – even our rejection. God risked all to become one of us so that we might receive his peace.

Later on the adult Jesus said “My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives.” And he taught his followers and he continues to teach us about living out his peace.

The world imposes violence and tyranny. Conflict and retribution are its ways. Jesus offers love and he teaches us to pray for our enemies, to forgive.\*\*\*

When the world sets us against one other, Jesus shows us what it means to simply be present to each other and to care for one another in genuine community.

When advertisers tell us peace of mind is found in our wealth and in what we own, Jesus teaches us about generosity and compassion.

When politicians and community leaders suggest peace of mind comes through the care of personal and national interests, Jesus challenges us to live so that others who have little may simply live.

When the world urges us to build barriers, to lock out the stranger and to chase desperate people who are seeking a safe place to live away, Jesus offers us hospitality that is inclusive of everyone.

As a baby – as a youth and then an adult this humble, poor man is one of us. But even more he is the Son of God. He is our Saviour who lives our life, dies our death and is raised to life. In this he overcomes and he defeats the power of ancient Rome. He takes on and overcomes the violence of Augustus and the system the emperor represents.

Jesus greets us as our Lord with the words “*Peace be with you*”. And Friends, here is our peace. It comes back to this profound truth that we are children of God and brothers and sisters of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And because of this we can truly be at peace with ourselves. Because of this we will find the courage to be peacemakers in our world, in our communities and in our families.

Today we celebrate with Mary and Joseph, we celebrate with the innkeeper, the shepherds and people everywhere - the birth of Jesus, God's son.

God comes to us. God does not come to coerce or control. Rather, God comes gently and quietly to be present with us and to invite us to trust. God comes to share life in its fullness and to enter into a relationship of love and grace. God comes to be with us on this day of days - to offer us his peace.

As you celebrate Christmas Day – the birth of Jesus Christ .... do open your hearts to receive this child and do trust him. For he will not fail you. **Jesus Christ is our peace.**

May we joyfully join the chorus of the angels *Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those whom he favours.*

© Rev. Laurel Barr

\* Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas*, HarperOne, 2007, p.61f

\*\* Henri Nouwen in Christopher C. Walker, *Peace like a Diamond*, Spectrum Publications, Melbourne, 2009, p.69

\*\*\* Archbishop Dr Phillip Aspinall, Primate Anglican Church of Australia in *2011 Christmas Messages from Australian Church Leaders*, National Council of Churches in Australia