

January 1, 2023, Feast of Naming of Jesus, Eucharist 10.30 am

Readings: Numbers 6.22-end; Psalm 8; Galatians 4.4-7; and Luke 2.15-21.

Despair and hope

- Even though human like creatures have been on earth for about 4 million years and homo-sapiens about 100,000 years, it is first of January 2023 because Jesus was named 2023 years ago. I wonder what was going through Mary's mind on that day?
- What is going through your mind? What have your New Year greetings been?
- In their Christmas letter one of our friends said they look forward with despair and hope.
- In talking about this sermon my wife said let's not have one of your gloom and doom offerings!
- But to be fair as we look at the world as it is there doesn't seem to be too much to be hopeful about.
- There is the dreadful war in Ukraine that looks as if it could go on a long time with all the terrible suffering for so many ordinary folks.
- The ongoing pandemic of COVID and flu that is still bringing widespread suffering and death.
- The awful suffering of women in Iran and Afghanistan.
- There is the suffering as a consequence of the horrendous weather events as a result of climate change, in Pakistan, in the US, in Australia, in Africa.
- There is the apparent indifference on the part of our leaders to the consequences of the cost-of-living crisis.
- As Rowan Williams pointed out in an article yesterday - the cost of living crisis is an example of costs being transferred from the powerful to the powerless .. to a population pushed with increasing aggressiveness into debt, housing, food and energy poverty.
- It is a breakdown in the covenantal character of society that no one is safe unless everyone is safe.
- Then there is the suffering of migrants that are stigmatised as greedy aliens, who are exploited by people traffickers and then threatened with being trafficked to some other dire destination.
- These are all bad situations - we may ask where is God, where is love in this. However, maybe we can find hope by looking in other directions?
- The Advent story is one of hope and joy, and we have seen over this season that it infects non-believers and believers alike. Witness the thousands that came to this Cathedral over the Christmas period.
- Psalm 8 that the choir sang rejoices in the wonder and greatness of God, and how the enormity of the Universe is his work, the wonder of creation shows God's love of all he has made and how human beings are very special to God.

- Some call this God's first incarnation. It reveals God's power and great love in creation.
- But God's second incarnation is utterly mind blowing.
- Why did God do it?
- Creation and life in this universe is very challenging, the process of evolution is hard at times, new life involves the suffering and death of the old.
- After almost 13 billion years, self-conscious humans evolved with the capacity to be aware of God and to know the difference between good and evil.
- These wonderful capabilities present great possibilities for good, and awful possibilities for evil.
- God out of love for all he had made, and out of his special love for humans came to live with us.
- To show how the good in us can be so full of love, to suffer as a consequence of the evil humans can also do, to experience despair, but to show that death is not the end, and that God's purposes for us are resurrection life.
- As we have gone through Advent it is so easy to overlook the enormity of God's action in going through all that to show his love for humans. The modern song 'What did Mary Know?' catches some of mind-blowing implications. Did she know that as she kissed her baby boy, she was kissing the face of God the mighty creator and lover of the universe?
- We know the story of Jesus' earthly life. How his care and compassion encompasses all, in the ordinary suffering and joy of life, for women and men, children and adults.
- Sinners, the outcast and the alien were particularly sought out by him. Love without conditions. Even when they crucified him - Father forgive them! Love incarnate - This is our God.
- Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955), the brilliant French Jesuit priest, mystic, and paleontologist, saw evolution, as involving two complementary aspects - the physical and the conscious.
- So from the very simplest electron, atom, through plants and animals consciousness evolves with the physical.
- With consciousness God has implanted his divine spark of love in everything created, down to every last subatomic particle and photon of light.
- For Teilhard, love, revealed especially through Jesus . . . is the essential nature of God. As he envisioned it, divine love is the self-expressive creative force that gave birth to our evolving universe.
- It is that same divine love that continuously keeps every atom of creation existing and moving forward on its grand evolutionary journey back to God, that he calls the omega point.
- We are on a great journey driven by Love, that started almost 14 billion years ago whose ultimate aim is the great work of union, a desire that pervades the cosmos.
- God is working his purposes out, and in the end all will be well.

- This is a grand vision that is the source of our first and ultimate hope, but sometimes as we live through physical suffering ourselves, or see those who we love suffer, or we see so many suffer in many tragic ways we wonder is this real?
- We cannot see God bringing immediate comfort or resolution to the many issues that cause us and many others to despair.
- Teilhard understood that the present can cloud the vision.
- He says 'Let us look at the earth around us. What is happening under our eyes within the mass of peoples? What is the cause of this disorder in society, this uneasy agitation, these swelling waves, these whirling and mingling currents and these turbulent and formidable new impulses? [Humanity] is visibly passing through a crisis of growth . . . becoming dimly aware of its shortcoming and its capacities. . . .
- But Teilhard sees this apparent chaos and suffering as the universe growing luminous like the horizon just before sunrise. It has a sense of premonition and of expectation.
- Can we really see sunrise on the horizon that gives us reassurance that God's purposes of love are really being realised?
- I have been struck this Advent and Christmas time how many have seen love, kindness and joy emerging from even the most despairing situations. These have come from the religious and the non-religious.
- Stories of determination to smile and rejoice in midst of war. From Ukraine even under bombardment - we are going to smile and celebrate!
- Stories of people determined to relieve and help in all sorts of dire situations.
- Thousands of ordinary folks going to great lengths to provide food and warmth to those without.
- Those battling to care for asylum seekers and refugees and those who are suffering at the hands of people traffickers and government officialdom.
- I have been struck by the fact that much of the suffering and despair frequently arises as a consequence of the actions of one person or institution
- Institutions and those who hold power in them rarely have love and kindness as a prime motivator. They are more concerned with their success and survival.
- A Putin who promotes war for his own aggrandisement.
- A government minister who decides benefits will cease above a threshold sum with no concern for the consequences for those just above.
- Hundreds of thousands of children with no free school lunch or families driven into poverty.
- Yet so often out of the communities around, emerge folks who come together to do all they can to help those in need.
- Climate change is another area where we can despair at the decisions made by those individuals and institutions in power who want to help their mates, that take the planet in the wrong direction.
- Because of such behaviour the UN secretary General reports that 2022 was another mile on the highway to climate hell.

- And yet Immediately it is thousands of the ordinary folks motivated by love for the planet, their children and grandchildren who get out and protest. It is the small communities that set up their own solar or wind turbine cooperatives, or green allotments who are generating a groundswell of care and love for our planet.
- In our own community we can rejoice in the eco group's deep concern for our world, and in the care many give to those amongst us who are sick or vulnerable.
- Recently research into Kindness has shown that humans have evolved to be kind, it helps us and our species to survive and grow. What's more givers of kindness get a positive feedback emotionally when they are aware that they have been kind.
- This all makes great sense because we know God made us for love, to be loved and to love. This is where hope lies.
- Robert Kennedy at the University of Capetown in 1966 speaking to students living under the yoke of cruel apartheid offered this solace and encouragement.
- He said: Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.
- It happened in South Africa, as it has in so many other places.
- God created this evolving universe because God is Love and each of us is God's gift to the world. Because of that divine spark within all peoples increasingly across the world people are realising that life's purpose is to make a difference in transforming that world.
- We can know that God's love will draw us and all things to that completion in Christ.
- So if we have eyes to look we can see that out of despair and suffering comes love. hope, joy and resurrection.
- Paul tells the Galatians 'God has sent the spirit of His Son into our hearts crying Abba Father!
- As the Lord told Israel, so he tells us, 'Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.
- As we share the bread and wine together God assures us that all will be well.
- Amen