

When Christmas isn't happy
24 December 2014

Luke 2:1-20

Just over two years ago, my Christmas preparations were following a familiar pattern. I had presents to organise, functions to attend, and travel to book. And a sermon to finish.

Then, everything was thrown into disarray, when I found out my friend Steve had died in hospital, following an altercation outside a London pub. I had known Steve for nearly 30 years, and although I had not seen much of him since he moved to London, we had kept in regular touch, and I was really looking forward to his planned trip home the following year. But I hadn't anticipated his trip home would be made in a wooden box.

Steve's flamboyant nature made him a Wellington identity. His band *Vas Deferens* was legendary. But Steve was also a gentle, caring, and cultured man, who loved art and history almost as much as he loved rock and roll. And he was the sort of person who could never hurt anyone, which made the violent nature of his untimely death all the more shocking to his large family and his many friends, and I have never known anybody else who meant so much to so many different people. Steve was such a larger than life character that it was difficult to accept he was no longer with us.

Now you are probably starting to wonder what all this has got to do with Christmas. After all, you have probably come here tonight expecting to hear a story about angels and shepherds, and Mary and Joseph, and a baby in a manger. Because that is usually what you get at Midnight Mass. But Steve's unexpected death just over two years ago turned my Christmas preparations on their head, and I was reminded that Christmas is not a happy time for everyone. For as well as being a time of rejoicing and celebration, it can also be a time of disappointment and sadness, which can be compounded by the pressure secular society in particular puts on us to be happy and joyous at this time.

Tragedies often seem to happen at or around Christmas. Like Cyclone Tracy, which devastated Darwin on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in 1974, with a loss of 71 lives. The Tangiwai Disaster, which occurred 61 years ago this very night, claimed the lives of 151 people. Two years ago, the shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, in the USA, claimed the lives of 28 people, mostly children. And on a much larger scale,

there was the Boxing Day 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami, which left about 280,000 people dead or unaccounted for. But disasters are no more likely to occur around Christmas than any other time. They just stand out more.

While some people will be recently bereaved, others will have lost loved ones much earlier in the year, and may think they have got over it. Then they will see the empty chair at the Christmas dinner table. And it will all come flooding back to them.

Then there are the widowed, the separated, and those who are excluded from seeing their children. Their loneliness has probably intensified over Christmas. The closest they will get to celebrating could be downing a bottle of cut price whisky in the hope of temporarily muting their pain in the only way they know how.

And many families will have all present and accounted for, but will be severely struggling. At Christmas, there is huge pressure on people to spend, and many people will have let the bills slip, just to ensure their children don't miss out on Christmas.

All up, there are many people that either feel they can't face Christmas, can't really afford it, or feel like they have nothing to celebrate. Does all this make Christmas a farce?

No it doesn't.

Now I really can't get away with not saying Christmas is about a baby. But this baby was no ordinary child. He was the Word made flesh, God in the form of a vulnerable little baby. So why did this happen? What prompted this divine intervention in the human world? My answer to this question is that humanity had become estranged from God, and there was only one way for us to be reconciled. And that was for God to become fully human, even though this meant experiencing the joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain and high hopes and broken dreams that are part of human life. Including death. But His was a death over which He ultimately triumphed with His resurrection, and His resurrection brings hope to us all.

While the world was radically altered by the incarnation of the Christ two thousand years ago, it is obvious when we look at the state of the world today, that the God's involvement with us is not yet finished. God's Kingdom may have begun to manifest itself in human

affairs, but its full extent is yet to be realised. The world may still be broken, but it will be completely healed in God's time.

Tell that to the downtrodden, the broken hearted, and all others who are suffering right now, you might sarcastically suggest. And you wouldn't be the first person if you asked why God allows suffering in the first place, especially for the innocent. But as David Henson, an American Episcopalian priest, said in response to the Sandy Hook shootings, it's not that God is absent, whether through lack of care for humanity or lack of prayer by humanity. Rather, God is with us, weeping with us, sharing in our sorrow. He also suggested God has been weeping for a long time, but we are only just starting to listen.

I would now like to read a poem. We don't know who wrote it. It is not exactly a literary masterpiece. And if I was to be brutally honest, I would have to say the theology is more than a little bit simple and naïve in places, especially with its depiction of Heaven. But don't let these minor details distract you.

My first Christmas in Heaven

I see the countless Christmas trees
around the world below
With tiny lights like Heaven's stairs,
reflecting on the snow.

The sight is so spectacular,
please wipe away the tear
For I am spending Christmas
with Jesus Christ this year.

I hear the many Christmas songs
that people hold so dear
But the sounds of music can't compare
with the Christmas choir up here.

I have no words to tell you,
the joy their voices bring,
For it is beyond description,
to hear the angels sing.

I know how much you miss me,
I see the pain inside your heart.

But I am not so far away,
We really aren't apart.

So be happy for me, dear ones,
You know I hold you dear.
And be glad I'm spending Christmas
with Jesus Christ this year.

I sent you each a special gift,
from my heavenly home above,
I sent you each a memory
of my undying love.

After all love is a gift
more precious than pure gold.
It was always most important
in the stories Jesus told.

Please love and keep each other,
as my Father said to do.
For I can't count the blessing or love
he has for each of you.

So have a Merry Christmas and
wipe away that tear.
Remember, I am spending Christmas
with Jesus Christ this year.

I discovered this poem after Diane, a friend in the USA, received a copy of it two Christmasses ago. Six weeks earlier, her brother Brett had been executed by the State of Ohio, despite many people, myself included, having been convinced of his innocence. But before Brett went to his death, he arranged for a nun to send this poem to Diane for Christmas.

As I read it, I thought of Brett and I remembered how I had lit a candle for him in our cathedral a few hours after he had died. I thought of others who were no longer with us. And when I got to the part about the Christmas Choir, I couldn't help but think of Steve, and I imagined him trying to teach choirs of angels to sing *Vas Deferens* songs like 'Microwave Pies'.

So when we think of those who have been taken from us, and whose loss hurts us, we should acknowledge what they meant to us, and

not let this overwhelm us, but live in the light of the resurrection, and the hope this gives us to be one day together once more.

Ngā mihi mō te Kirihimete. Have a very Happy Christmas.

Darryl Ward

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