

Monday 24 December, 2018 – Midnight Mass

A sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne on Christmas Eve

Readings: Isaiah 9 : 2-7, Titus 2 : 11-14, Luke 2 : 1-14

I don't know whether you have had a chance to look at our nativity scene in the High Altar Sanctuary yet. It's based on a favourite Australian children's book, Julie Vivas' *The Nativity*.

I met Julie last year, and told her how much I liked the fact that the figures in her book are real people: a tired, happy-looking Mary, a delighted Joseph holding baby Jesus, and some very Aussie shepherds. These blokes are clearly at home in the paddocks and shearing sheds. Just as the angels are ready for stepping right into the mud and muck of this world, with their heavy work boots.

And that is precisely the point of the festival of Christmas. God's message of peace, God's message of a Saviour who will live among us and die for us, born as a baby, recognised as their king by shepherds and wise men, and worshipped by angels: that message comes right into the mess and muck of our world.

Into a time of political instability, as Israel lived under Roman occupation. Into a time of great social divide, as those who owned much added more to what they had, and those who only had very little grew poorer and poorer. Into a time where people were made homeless, or refugees, because of these political and social realities. And into that world God speaks through his messengers.

Messengers from heaven who proclaimed 'glory to God in the highest heavens and peace on earth to people of good will' as we heard in tonight's gospel reading. Their message, we heard, was not proclaimed in the capital Jerusalem, but spoken on the hillsides of the desert-country of Judea. Nor was it made known to kings, or priests and prophets, but to shepherds.

The message of peace for all people was first spoken to those who had no influence or power, was spoken first in the desert and not a city. Just as the bringer of that peace, whom the prophet Isaiah foretold as the 'Prince of Peace', was born not in princely surroundings, was born not in a royal palace, but in a feeding trough for cattle, in an underground shed attached to an inn.

Yet from the manger, and the desert, the message that peace has come for all humankind was carried to Jerusalem. And made known throughout the world, in all languages. At Christmas, peace *has* come for all people whom God favours.

And this peace comes in two ways: because of the birth of Jesus the Messiah at Bethlehem we are able to enjoy peace with God. Because Jesus was born, we may be able to know and *be* known by God, are able to take part in the life of God ourselves. As our reading from the letter to Titus puts it: 'the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all'.

We have peace with God, because 'our great God and Saviour' has become human in the child of Bethlehem. We have peace with God because he 'gave himself for us that he might redeem us. We have peace with God, because he invites us to be a part of 'the manifestation of his glory'.

The glory that is promised us is rooted in a relationship of love: just as God has become a human child, laid in a manger in an earthly home and family, so God also wants to live with *us*, wants to make his home with us. Through his Son Jesus he promises that when we know and love him, he will remain with us. And when we do that, we may find that just as God has become human, we also might become more like God.

We have peace with God, because God seeks to live in our hearts; and bring his peace to our hearts. That is the first gift of peace we celebrate at Christmas, and it can be ours when we love and know the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ.

The second gift that is offered us is the promise of peace among all people, and it flows from the first gift given us: when we are at peace with God and have peace in our hearts, then we are also given the strength and grace to work for peace among others.

When we are at peace ourselves, we are enabled to become peace-makers, be peace-bearers to others. Those of you who know God's peace already will also know the strength that knowing yourself at peace with God, and in your own hearts, gives for us to be bearers of peace to others.

Peace is more than the absence of conflict, is more than a mere possibility, the story of Christmas tells us. Peace is God's gift to us, and it is ours to receive and give this Christmas.

The place where Jesus was born like none other longs for the gift of peace. That peace can come, *will* come, when people accept for themselves the gifts of the Prince of Peace. Peace with God, and peace with others, because God, the giver of peace has come to be with us; wants to live with us, and *in* us. This Christmas we celebrate that God's peace has come to dwell among us again.

God's messengers bear the heavy boots of workmen, because there is a job to be done: to share that good news, to bring that invitation to know God, love God, and share his peace needs us to be ready and equipped to step into the mud and muck of our world – to be prepared to get our hands dirty as we become peace makers, peace bearers, and peace sharers.

I pray that God's peace and love will be yours this Christmas. And I encourage you to be active participants in the story of the love and peace of Christmas: don't just wait to open your pressies or to fire up the barbie.

Instead, join God's messengers of peace: put on your heavy boots, and share with your mates and countless others in the joyful, but hard yakka, of bringing God's love and peace to his people – both near and far.