

CLOTHED IN LOVE

Nicky Ing - 26th December 2004

Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm:111; Colossians 3:12-17; Matthew 2:13-23

Reflect on yesterday..... the privilege of being part of the celebration of the birth of Christ. Today, after all the services we have experienced, many people are likely to be spending special family time. In fact today is known as Family Day in our calendar. We are fortunate if we have close relatives with whom we can spend quality time...but we are also privileged to belong to the much wider family of the Christian community. We are reminded that we have one Father, God, and that we are brothers and sisters in Christ. It might be good to think about that for a moment and about the quality of our ties with our own family and with this community.

The reading from the NT today is helpful to us in teaching about, the kind of attitudes which should be found in a Christian household, and also a Christian community. Then in the Gospel we find Matthew describing the difficulties which the Holy Family, Joseph, Mary and Jesus, experience as they become homeless refugees, and how they cope with it all.

Matthew sees Jesus as reliving the history of his people. The Gospel story brings out for us the story of Moses in Egypt.....just as Moses had to be rescued from Pharaoh, so Jesus had to be rescued from Herod. The story contains echoes of the Exodus from Egypt, and the horror of Herod's cruelty in killing all the children under the age of two. There are still so many refugees in our world today, and so many children who have experienced the violence and terror of war. We see such images daily in our newspapers and our TV screens. Perhaps we try not to see them...because they disturb us too much....It is easy to avoid reading about these things....to switch channels and watch more entertaining programmes.

The theme of the family is a sensitive one really, as peoples' experiences differ so much. The celebration of Christmas can be so joyful, and yet in many homes there can be disagreements and conflict, especially where excessive alcohol is consumed.....leading to violence....and on our roads, we hear of so many tragic accidents at this time of year. Family relationships are often very fragile. Many children in South Africa do not have the love and care of a family...many have not known their fathers, many marriages end in divorce. Our modern world doesn't make it easy to hold onto commitment.....

The Holy Family, Joseph, Mary and Jesus, whom we read about a few minutes ago, didn't have it easy at all. At times they must have been cold, hungry, fearful, isolated.... uprooted, homeless, but because of their deep faith in God, and their love for one another, they came through safely. Many parents today also make great sacrifices for their children...and many single parents have to struggle to make ends meet...often in very difficult circumstances. I think we can draw inspiration from the example of Mary and Joseph.

The Colossians reading made me think about clothes, today! Fashions in clothes come and go...the long, short, tight, loose, colour fashions and styles, keep on changing. Clothes can make quite a statement about who we are, really. (Natal Witness, Tuesday this week.....5000 people in Portugal all dressed up as Santa Claus....described as a 'red tide of Santas!!') My little grandson has a pair of red Santa Claus slippers, which he loves to wear...and a Santa hat which he was given about a month ago....it is his favourite!!!

St. Paul speaks to us today about the essential wardrobe for every Christian: 'Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.....above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.' Whatever the fashion of the day might be, whatever the age group, Paul tells us the essential clothing for every Christian...Without **love**, no Christian is properly dressed...as community of Church of the Ascension, we are...if we think about it, a **family** that needs young, middle-aged and also the older people, living in harmony...**good relationship**...with one another.

Our young people need others to nurture them, believe in them, and give them hope about their own place in the world. They are generous in offering their love. We need their enthusiasm, the idealism, their commitment, and their energy...their voice needs to be heard in Church...they need to hear truth, yet they need to be protected in their vulnerability, they can be so spontaneous....they need help in facing up to life's disappointments, and they need encouragement in growing their faith. **They are God's children.**

We also need the **middle-aged**....we need the selfless love of single people who will encourage the welfare of others....and we need parents who will invest time and effort in their families...we also need those who have suffered disappointments in life...God cares about all who suffer and struggle....we need people who have the generosity to listen to those who are troubled, and help them towards inner healing. We need people who can bring out the best in others, who have the gift of encouragement....and especially those who will persevere even when the response of others is not very strong. We need people who pray, who are faithful in small things, no matter what happens...All these people are also **children of God.**

Older people are also an essential part of God's family. They may still be young at heart, and full of hope. They may have wisdom which life experiences have taught them....they may be able to look back at their lives and say it has all been worth the struggle to keep on loving and living. They may have mature faith...they may be faithful and steady in prayer...Some of them may be frail, and troubled by stiffness and pain.....some may be afraid of dying. Many of them enjoy a sense of humour, and the freedom to say what they think, even if others disagree!! Older people deserve respect, and the love which enables all of us to look into the future. They too, are children of God....**the elderly children of God.**

The human family and our Christian family are equally gifted with Young, middle aged, and Old....No matter what age we are, what clothes we choose to wear, and what styles we prefer, we should all be clothed with **compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience**.....in order to be able to live in harmony with one another.

Of course this is not always easy!!! But if we wear **LOVE** as a final covering, it will bring peace to everyone..

It **is** an idyllic picture, isn't it...but it is rooted in our Christian faith, in the heart of every person who has accepted Christ....and it is good to consider, for ourselves, what is our own place in this family of God. Am I an active and participating member of this family?? Do I have compassion and gentleness...patience....tolerance for others? What is God wanting to say to me about that today?

Earlier this week I was reading some thoughts from a book called '**Out of the Ordinary**' by Joyce Rupp, who is still a favourite writer of mine!! I wondered if these words would help us all this morning, just a day after Christmas...the poem is called '**the many disguises of Emmanuel**'

The Many Disguises of Emmanuel.

*Emmanuel, God-with-us,
Long-awaited, eagerly anticipated,
Delicious dreams of royal robes,
A messiah enthroned with elegance.*

False notions and easily accepted illusions.

*A few open ones, full of surprise,
Heard the fresh, full cry of life
Echoed in the uninhabited haven,
The only place ready for a birth that was ripe.*

*Shepherds, sages, and scribes,
Drawn by angels and stars,
Discovered this divine simplicity,
Then hurried from the hillside
With news that amazed them all.*

*But many years later the cry goes unheard,
Stifled in the roar of unyielding opinions,
Submerged in the noise of hasty judgments,
Masked in the false folds of cultural glitter.*

*The Surprising One continues to come,
Entering the world in endless disguise,
Concealed in those we have never forgiven,
Secreted in the hearts of people we despise,
Found in the rejected and unacceptable,
Hidden in the ones we ignore and criticise.*

----- Joyce Rupp

May God touch us all today and clothe us with the attitudes we need to live in harmony with one another....compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness,

patience.....and most of all, with love. And as we live out these last few days of the calendar year, may we find Emmanuel, God-With-Us, in many surprising and life-changing ways. Amen