

# 'Fear not'

A Sermon for Christmas Day and the end of 2016

St James, Lower Hutt and All Saints' Belmont

Keynote Bible passage: Luke 2.1 – 11

The angel said to the shepherds, 'fear not...'

A message written on a Christmas card received a couple of weeks ago read: ...'hoping you are surviving these challenging times'... Fear has been a pervading experience in recent months: an earthquake not far off being 'the big one', buildings being rendered unusable, then followed by heavy rains and flooding, slips blocking major highways, traffic congestion arising. All in all a quite unsettling time.

Then not only inconveniences or damage more extensive than first realised, there's the *emotional* effect on people especially the elderly and those living alone. Arising from this is for many folk is anxiety and fear. Fear of what might be next. Hence the relevance of a theme for this *Christmas sermon*, 'fear not'.

In gospel story there's several occasions that merited the counsel, 'Fear not or 'Do not be afraid.' Early on, angelic beings were sent to comfort persons and to bring a message of hope. To a very surprised Mary an angel appeared and included in the greeting was the comforting 'Fear not'. It was an angel that appeared to the shepherds and Luke tells us 'the glory of the Lord shone round them, and they were terrified'. A favourite carol includes the heartfelt verse: 'Fear not said he, for mighty dread had seized their troubled minds.' The angel conveyed an awesome message, 'Behold, I am bringing you good news for all the people, for to you is born this day in the city of David, a Saviour, who is the Messiah.'

Later, in his resurrection appearance Jesus, likewise had a message for the disciples. They had gathered in the Upper Room after his death, and in his risen-ness he appeared and first comforted those fearful (the doors were shut), distraught, grieving disciples with a greeting of 'peace be with you.' Then to give them the message he had indeed risen and had a task for them.

As we reflect, yes there is the reality of *fear*, part of our humanness – including reminders of the awesome power of nature, and of what more might there be. As we put the two alongside – the fear at the angels appearance back then and the fears we have now in such times, there is something in common. Each is an experience in *vulnerability*. In the daily run of events we likely cope well, but with something out of the ordinary, in the here and now of the uncertainty we are less confident. Such events occurring then – and now stop us in our tracks. We have to take stock of the situation.

May I suggest there is a '*spiritual dimension*' to this as well as physical and emotional effects. For the Holy Family and the disciples this was pretty obvious, the divine was being experienced in their very lives. Where then was God in these recent events? Even as news spread overseas I received notes of comfort

asking if things were ok, and texts, emails, and Facebook were expressing caring messages. Friends, family and church family either corresponded or called round. In the here and now of it we actually came together. And, praise God, there were few casualties.

These events were indeed crisis, and I believe God was certainly present through prompt rescue efforts in Kaikoura and North Canterbury, as well as folk comforting one another. There was a spiritual dimension as well as a practical response.

In reflecting on this it seems to me a very real spiritual dimension can be realised in the *unexpected*. This can be through a word of encouragement, a loving action, a message or a 'meeting'. Let me share an example which recently occurred of meeting up with a clergy person again after a space of some 30 years. We'd arranged to meet for a social coffee – I thought. In the conversation this person shared of currently being in a very difficult pastoral situation. We were able to discuss and to pray. It so seemed God's providence that such a meeting took place.

Another time of the spiritual is when one is in stillness, and it is like heaven on earth in the beauty of creation. It is truly a '*lived moment*' – sometimes just short, at other times more extended. Back in November I was very aware of this when on holiday and in a place one could view the sunset, and its constantly changing colours and design and then to watch the sun slowly slip into the ocean in the distance. I first came across this expression 'lived moment' some years ago after having experiences in nature of it being alive and surrounding, and retained as a picture in one's memory but not knowing what to call them. Following on from this another who had similar experiences named them as '*the grace of the lived moment*' attributing the experience not so much in human thinking but with divine origin.

Thus in this Sermon for Christmas may I alert you to experiences of the divine, those 'lived moments' that occur for you. One can't make them happen, rather when they do, for us to stop, to reflect, to be in awe of something God is doing in our lives. This God did in the lives of Mary and Joseph, and of the shepherds. Christian art has sought to portray this divine presence and to sense something of how the persons may be responding as in the annunciation and the birth of Jesus.

Thus this morning we gather together to share joy and peace in worship of God, in the silence and the singing and to participate in 'Holy Communion.' May I describe this is as experiencing something of 'heaven on earth.' Christmas is opportunity for valuing family and friendship as folk gather and express this in gifts given and received, of messages and cards, and contact made. May I further suggest there's something spiritual about that as they signify giving and receiving of love.

Then there's the Christmas break and January allowing opportunity to have quiet times in creation, and be aware of 'heaven on earth.'

The angel said, 'Fear not'.