A Very Inclusive Nativity

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney at a Service of Lessons and Carols for Christmas Eve, Tuesday 24 December 2013, by David Gill.

In this church some years ago, I mentioned a Christmas celebration that took place when I was pastor of a church in Hong Kong. Nobody ever remembers sermons, I know, so perhaps it's safe to tell the story again.

Kowloon Union Church (KUC) is an international English-speaking congregation in the heart of Hong Kong. Some years ago, it ran a pre-school kindergarten that brought dozens of little munchkins, five mornings a week, to the church hall, where they would play together, do activities together, sometimes sing together, occasionally fight together, and somehow through it all together improve their grasp of the mysteries of the English language.

It was the United Nations in short pants and gym boots. We had little Chinese, little Indians and Nepalis, some little Africans and one or two little Europeans. Some were Christians. Most were Buddhists, Taoists, Muslims or Hindus.

So what to do about religious festivals? That was easy -- we celebrated the lot. The kids dressed up for Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights. They partied for Eid al-Fitr, marking the end of Islam's Ramadan. They observed the various Chinese special days. And they revelled in Christmas. The result was a very multicultural crop of five-year-old graduates – a slightly confused crop, perhaps, but certainly a multicultural one.

Their big event, each December, was the Christmas concert. Our little multifaith mafia would take over the church and sing the songs of Christmas for an equally multifaith congregation of adoring parents. But one year the teachers decided to be daring. A concert was not enough. We would try a nativity pageant as well.

How do you turn a gang of pre-schoolers into a nativity play? The answer is, with difficulty! First, you must find your key players: a Mary, a Joseph and if you're lucky a suitably cute baby Jesus; a grumpy inn-keeper; a bunch of shepherds; a gaggle of angels; three wise men and, if you're into gender equality as we were, three wise women as well. What about the rest? They become animals, that's what, and parents and teachers apply their ingenuity to finding or creating lots and lots of animal costumes.

So it was that the nativity at Kowloon Union Church, that year, included not only a large flock of sheep, some cows and a couple of donkeys, but also a platoon of little pandas (after all, we were in China), a kangaroo (you didn't know there were kangaroos in the nativity story? well there are now!), even a couple of African gorillas. We had a rather mangy looking lion, who was okay until an angel pulled his tail and, sadly, he disintegrated. There was even, dangerously close to the baby Jesus, a dinosaur. Then, just when I thought I'd seen everything, I noticed a human ring-in as well. For there, lurking at the back of the manger, was … Spiderman!

It was a *very* inclusive nativity.

I thanked my lucky stars there was no biblical expert present, to haul us over the coals for taking such liberties with the truth. But then it dawned on me: maybe we were being more faithful to the truth than we knew.

For isn't that crazy comprehensiveness precisely what the birth of the Christ child is all about? A divine love that exceeds all expectations and defies all conventions? A divine love that respects no boundaries, that knows no limits, that sets no conditions? A divine love that's full of shocks and surprises? A divine love that is ludicrously, absurdly, insanely, promiscuously inclusive?

Think of that group in Bethlehem so long ago.

It was a most unlikely line-up. Even without KUC's pandas, kangaroo, gorillas, lion, dinosaur and Spiderman, it was still an unlikely line-up. A young woman with a shall-we-say ambiguous pregnancy. Her tired and probably confused partner. A less-than-helpful hotel receptionist. And a few farm workers. Not exactly the welcoming committee one would expect for the Son of God.

Think of what was to come.

From Bethlehem he became an asylum seeker and turned up, uninvited, on a foreign shore. Then to an obscure village for what we can only presume was an unremarkable childhood, a typical adolescence, a routine job. Again, not at all what people were looking for in the Messiah.

Most of all, think of what they said about his life.

They said he stood up for the poor and downtrodden. They said he enjoyed partying with the world's rejects. They said he cared deeply about people – all

people, especially the sick, the sad, the despised, those the rest of us just didn't want to know. They said more – that in all this he embodied, in a very special way, the love of the one he called Father. They said his execution was not the end of the story, but only the end of the beginning. They said something in him proved stronger, more enduring than all the powers of evil, hatred and death.

Francis our pope – I choose my words with care – Francis *our* pope is right, in the message that's becoming the hallmark of his remarkable pontificate. The message that mercy matters, compassion always trumps judgement, kindness is what life is all about. In his words, Christ "draws us into the vortex of love".

The crazy comprehensiveness of divine love, exceeding all expectations, defying all conventions, outliving all rejections. That's what they glimpsed in the life that had its beginning this holy night in Bethlehem.

And that's still what the Christian faith is about today: the amazing inclusiveness of a God whose compassion continues to embrace each and every one of his children, no matter who they are, no matter where they are, no matter what they believe, no matter how they live. Each and every one, no matter who, no matter what.

No wonder the nativity of such a God attracts the most improbable line-up, draws together the most unlikely crowd.

Still today. There is room beside the crib for each one of us. Even – and especially -- the most unlikely of us. Even you. Even me.

So let us, with hearts and minds as well as voices, sing along with the angels: "Glory to this (wonderfully inclusive) newborn King!"

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