

“I’ll Ride with You” - God

A sermon preached at St Stephen’s Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney by David Gill, on Christmas Eve 2014

Last week, this great city had its heart broken.

St Stephen’s was involved. The tragedy happened just 100 metres from here. We were in the police exclusion zone. Yesterday the funeral of Tori Johnson, the Lindt café manager, took place from this church.

As events unfolded, Sydney went into shock. The shock soon took on religious overtones. We knew nothing about a disturbed human being with a criminal history. We saw only a black flag, with Arabic lettering.

And we were afraid.

We feared for the hostages. We feared for our community. We feared for ourselves. Australia’s Muslims, familiar with being treated as outsiders, had an additional fear: another wave of hatred and abuse, aimed right at them.

But last week, something rather wonderful happened too. Not only here, but throughout Australia. Something that has touched the hearts of many, in this land and far beyond.

Let me remind you.

It started on the Monday evening, as the gunman still held his hostages. A woman on a Brisbane train heading home from work noticed another woman sitting nearby – a Muslim, judging from her garb – who looked frightened. She had removed her hijab, to be less conspicuous. At their station, she ran after the Muslim, saying “Put it back on. I’ll walk with you”.

Returning home, she did some Facebooking and tweeting which mushroomed fast into a massive social media campaign. The hashtag was “*I’ll Ride with You*”. In two days there were half a million tweets, with people volunteering to ride with Muslims scared to take public transport, to show solidarity and to prevent any reprisal attacks or abuse.

“I’ll Ride with You,” at one level, was about safety on public transport. In truth, it was about so much more. A vision of the kind of country we want to become. Someone even called it “a love poem, written by the people to the people”.

So simple. People of all faiths and of none, young and old together, saying to a particular group of endangered fellow citizens: don’t be afraid, we care about

you, our nation will not be divided, the voices of hate will not prevail, evil will not conquer.

It was risky, of course. Compassion always is. An offer like that can be misunderstood. You may be rejected by the very person you're trying to help. If hate is in the air, it might be redirected towards you. Ride with someone who is vulnerable, and you make yourself vulnerable too.

But still, many people decided, we want to do this. Because we care.

Now, this is not something I say very often these days, or very easily even tonight, but ... *"I'll Ride with You"* has made me just a little bit proud to be an Australian.

And it has recalled us all to the deep meaning of Christmas.

God is not on Facebook, unfortunately, and for some strange reason he does not tweet. But he does speak, loud and clear, in the event we mark this holy night. In the child born in Bethlehem, he says, I will ride with you. In the man of Nazareth, I will journey with you. I may be misunderstood. I may be rejected. The journey may take me to a cross. But, come what may, I will ride with you. Because you matter so much, because I care so deeply.

There is a word from the Hebrew scriptures that we hear sometimes at this time of the year. It is "Immanuel," and it means "God with us". St Matthew's gospel applies that word to the birth of Jesus. So does our next carol.

That's what Christmas is about, what Christians around the world tonight are celebrating. For some, it is an awed conviction. For others, a heartfelt yearning. For all of us, a wondrous possibility.

God with us.

Not just on one journey, but on all our journeys. Not only on one day, but through all our days. Not in the good times only, but also in the very worst.

In life, and in death.

Whether you know it or not. Whether you claim the label "Christian" or not. Whether you think of yourself as religious or not. Whoever you are, wherever life may have taken you, whatever the circumstances in which you find yourself, the God who cares so much is riding with you.

That conviction brings us together this night. It's what sparked the old stories we're hearing, the old songs we're singing. It is the reason for the season. It is the heart of the Christian faith. It is history's great and mighty wonder.

Christ, born in Bethlehem. The Eternal, with us.

It will cost him dearly, that we know. But he is riding with us. To the end.

And beyond.

Thanks be to God!

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