

24/25 December 2019	Christmas Eve/Day 2019
	The Reverend Sarah Park

I don't know about you,  
but I'm well ready for the baby Jesus to arrive.  
If only so that we can get a break  
from all the madness:  
the end of year panic at work,  
the inescapable throngs of bargain hunters,  
small kids having meltdowns in the confectionary aisle. Big kids  
having meltdowns  
behind the wheels of their cars.  
The complex logistics of feasting and holidaying.

Quite frankly, it makes me want to have  
a cup of tea and a lie down, just thinking about it.  
But beyond the tiredness and the stress,  
beyond the financial worries and the family dynamics, all this  
madness has an insidious potential.  
For it has the power to make us cynical.  
And if there is anything that is  
diametrically opposed to the Nativity story,  
it is cynicism.

And so it is good to be here.  
For our being here is an opportunity  
to shake off the silly season,  
and enter once again into its sacredness.  
To hear again this story about angels, and shepherds,  
an unconventional birth in  
less than salubrious circumstances.

It is a story that brings fantasy and reality  
into the same smelly stable.  
It is a story that feeds our faith,  
that touches a sacred place within our memories,  
that reconnects us with a part of ourselves  
that defies cynicism.

'That is why we need the romance, the symbols,  
and the colour of the nativity.'  
For we are invited to enter the story,  
enjoy its richness, and find ourselves within it.

**Joseph** barely gets a mention in this story.  
He is the one in the background.  
The one who is driven by care and concern  
for his family.  
We better appreciate Joseph  
when we understand the context within which  
his journey with Mary took place.  
The census which opens this narrative  
gives it a sinister undertone.  
The people of Israel being herded to their  
tribal birthplaces in order to be counted,  
for purposes known only to the Emperor.  
And so Joseph must take his heavily pregnant wife  
on a long and exhausting journey.  
They have no choice. The Emperor has ultimate power.

Joseph is the one who is seeking to do what is right.  
Who is trying to hold together  
the conflicting demands of duty:

to do the right thing by Mary, to obey the law,  
and to protect Mary and her unborn child.  
He is the honourable one.  
The unsung hero in this narrative.

I wonder if you recognise a bit of Joseph in yourself? Trying to  
do the right thing,  
in the face of difficult odds, from behind the scenes. Where will  
Joseph sit at your table?

**Mary** gets a lot of air time,  
but we know very little about her.  
She is but a girl in a man's world;  
what's more a Jewish girl in a Roman man's world. There is an  
overwhelming vulnerability  
about this young scrap of a thing:  
heavily pregnant and journeying to a backwater town. Yet in all  
the passages in which she appears,  
what is most striking about Mary  
is her willingness to do what God calls her to.  
She is open to being a vehicle of good news.  
And so alongside her vulnerability  
there is a strength which is undeniable.

And so I wonder if you recognise  
a bit of Mary in yourself.  
That inner strength that comes  
not from courage or bravado,  
but from openness and faith?  
Openness to love in spite of hurt;  
faith in the goodness of God

in spite of the harshness of the world.  
Where will Mary sit at your table?

We've all played a **shepherd** in a nativity play.  
The obligatory tea towel  
with a bit of elastic tying it onto our heads.  
The shepherds have become a caricature  
which is so far removed from their original context.

For in the time of this story, shepherds were listed among the  
most despised occupations.  
Most of the time they were thought of as  
thieves and were generally considered dishonest. Shepherds  
were considered so unreliable  
in Jewish society that they were  
the only group that was not allowed  
to testify in a court of law even if they were eyewitnesses to a  
crime.  
They would not just be unexpected guests,  
but scandalous and unwelcome guests.

If we were to re-tell this story in our time and place,  
we might cast the homeless or gang members  
in place of shepherds. They lived a hard life.  
An unromantic life protecting their sheep  
from wolves and bandits.  
Yet these are the ones who are the first in  
on the big news.  
People whose testimony would never be believed.  
Over the course of the narrative they move  
from terror, to awe, from awe to action,

and from action to praise.  
For in this story there is room even for  
the cynic to experience transformation.

And so I wonder if you recognise  
a bit of the shepherds in yourself.  
The part that is tensed against tenderness,  
yet longs to be transformed and accepted.  
Will the shepherds be welcome at your table?

Joseph, Mary and the Shepherds.  
Of course there is one other character that didn't make it into  
the original narrative. **Sharon**.

*She was five,  
sure of the facts,  
and recited them with slow solemnity  
convinced every word was revelation.*

*She said  
they were so poor  
they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat  
and they went a long way from home  
without getting lost.*

*The lady rode a donkey, the man walked,  
and the baby was inside the lady.*

*They had to stay in a stable  
with an ox and an ass (hee-hee)  
but the Three Rich Men found them  
because a star lited the roof.  
Shepherds came and you could pet the sheep  
but not feed them.*

*Then the baby was borned.  
And do you know who **he** was?*

*Her small eyes inflated to the size of fifty cent pieces.  
The baby was God.*

*And she jumped in the air  
whirled round,  
dove into the sofa  
and buried her head under the cushion  
which is the only proper response  
to the Good News of the Incarnation.<sup>1</sup>*

Do you recognise Sharon in yourself?  
The wide-eyed and playful one  
who engages with a big-hearted simplicity,  
who reminds us that  
the gospel story is so radical  
that it changed the shape of human history.  
And what's more, if we let it,  
it might even change the shape of **our** history.  
Where might Sharon sit at your table?

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<sup>1</sup> John Shea, 'Sharon's Christmas Prayer' in *The Hour of the Unexpected*

This Christmas,  
may you welcome to the table  
all the parts of yourself that you recognise in this story. The duty  
and honour of Joseph,  
the openness and faith of Mary,  
the surprising transformation of cynical shepherds  
and the innocent delight of Sharon.

May the sacredness of the season blossom within you. And may  
Christ, the prince of peace,  
dwell in all the places you dwell. Amen.