

SERMON FOR CHRISTMAS 2020

THE VERY REV'D KEN GOODGER

God, you spoke, and your Word became flesh, bringing glad tidings of joy for all people. Grant that we may hear the good news of your salvation, and in our lives be your people of peace to the ends of the earth. Amen.

Why? It's a question we often hear asked, especially by young children, usually in response to an answer or explanation from their parents or other adults to the question, 'Why?' But 'Why?' is a question that adults often ask as well. And it is even a question for people of faith. Why is the person I prayed for not being healed? Why do bad things happen to good people? Why isn't God doing something about the coronavirus pandemic?

And 2020 is certainly throwing out many of these questions and more, not only related to COVID-19 but also to last summer's bushfires, and even the social and political turmoil that our world seems to be descending into this year.

The question of where God is in the midst of our troubled times is an easy one to ask. No doubt many people who had doubts about God's existence, felt that they have had those doubts confirmed over the last twelve months, while others whose faith has been firm over many years may have begun to feel their faith crumbling around the edges.

Many of these doubts and questions can be shaped by our view of God. And I would like to suggest there are three basic ways in which we can see God which can shape how we react to the reality of the world around us with either doubt, fear, or faith.

The first view of God that people often have is God as Divine Santa.

Firstly, let me just say that I think that Santa is great! (To all the kids in the congregation, let me just say that I've met Santa on numerous occasions, and he has always been extremely friendly, and you almost always get what you ask for from him, although I think sometimes he might be a bit too generous, and so sometimes our Mum or Dad might whisper in Santa's ear that the gift you've asked for might be a bit too much.

Secondly, I'd like to say that God is not Santa. But people often confuse Santa and God. Because they believe that like Santa, God is in the business of wish fulfilment. Sometimes Christians can pray to God with a wish-list of things they want to receive, they want changed, or they want right now thank you very much.

The problem with believing in God as a wish fulfiller is that we know from experience that God doesn't always deliver exactly what we want. But if we do believe that God is there to fulfill our wishes, then our faith will be shaken and we will be often be disappointed.

The second view of God that I often find in people is God as Divine Headmaster. (Now once again kids, I'd just like to say that headmasters and principals were a lot scarier when I was kid than they are nowadays. Just ask Mum and Dad or your grandparents). My dad used to tell me the story of how when he walked to school through the family farm, he would rub

cow pats into his hands to toughen them up, due to the daily canings he received from the school principal.

Unfortunately, I've come across many people in my ministry who see God as a divine school headmaster, ready to dole out punishment at a moments notice. Scripture says that God is 'slow to anger and abounding in mercy', but many people sadly see the opposite.

And events like bushfires and pandemics are clear signs of God's disfavour under this view. The problem for me with this view is that if God does punish us for our sins, then God is extremely unfair and indiscriminate in his punishments. In the wake of the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami which left at least a quarter of a million people dead, some religious leaders stated that the Tsunami was a punishment from God. If it was, then why were by far the greatest number of victims were poor people of colour. It seems exceedingly unfair that these people would be singled out by God for divine retribution. If this was from God, then I'm not sure I want to believe.

The third way we can view God is shown in the story of Christmas.

Luke's nativity story begins with Caesar Augustus, the most powerful man in the known world. Yet it ends with the lowliest people. Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds are so very insignificant compared to the great Caesar. And yet Luke states that they are more important, and that what they are doing is changing the world as we know it. The weak and helpless child born to this young mother in a cow shed will change the course of history.

In his gospel, St. Matthew states that Jesus is 'Emmanuel', that is, 'God is with us'. And so both Matthew and Luke in their stories about Jesus' birth remind us of an important truth. And that is that the God who comes to us in the form of a small vulnerable child in an obscure part of the world is not an unapproachable and untouchable god. This God gets into the messiness of human life with us, to show us the depths of his love for us and to show us that God loves us, and is always with us, no matter what. In Jesus, God got involved. And when God did decide to get involved, God didn't come to punish, or frighten, or threaten, or to make all our wishes come true. Rather, God showed up in the most helpless and powerless way possible, as a human child. And through this we are shown that God is love, as God takes our human form, for us.

So what view of god do you have? Which view of God are we desperately holding on to, or which view of god are we desperately hoping to abandon? My hope and pray for each of us here is that we may come to know that God is love, that God is with us, and that nothing in our lives, or in our world, can separate us from God, who is with us.