

Sermon on Luke 1: 26-38

Nothing Is Impossible For God

Sermons can begin from just about anywhere in my experience.

Anything with the sniff of revelation in it.

Sometimes a word from the biblical text leaps off the page and gets things going.

Sometimes the text itself is a compelling story which opens up vast avenues of meaning.

Sometimes a personal experience can set things off.

Sometimes a piece of literature, music... even films can stir up proclamation!

Sometimes an event from history is somehow revealing of the movement of God.

And sometimes, as it has been this week, worldly heartache so grabs our attention, and so disrupts our balance, that we come raw and wondering what consolations might possibly be found.

We come back to the source and the heart of the compassionate God, hoping that some insight, some word, even some silence might speak into our pain and confusion.

Trying to find something to say is a perilous endeavour at such times.

We risk our words devolving into cliché or caricature.

Where they can bounce off the deeper issues and not really sink in, like a rock which skips across the river from one bank to another.

It only scratches the surface.

We risk giving trite answers to greatly difficult and troubling questions, which only makes things worse.

In the wake of Pakistan, Martin Place, Nigeria, Cairns this week, and the many other humanitarian crises the world is facing, what, if anything, can be said?

How, particularly, on the fourth Sunday of Advent when the church traditionally embraces the theme of 'love', can we speak of Good News, of 'Gospel', given the events of the last seven days?

The truth is we don't really know what to say a lot of the time.

And maybe it's not only okay, but healthy to admit it.

What can God have to say to us today?

Can our hearts truly be prepared this day to hear the word of the Lord and receive the Christ child into our broken existence?

We confront, then, an awkward paradox when we come to listen for the word of the Lord in a story about a divine announcement.

As we struggle to find appropriate words to say, struggle to imagine good news is even possible in our greatly troubled world, Luke tells us a story about a word from God coming into the most human of situations.

The angel of the Lord greets Mary, a poor teenager from a Galilean backwater.

And as if this wasn't surprising enough, the content of the message must have sounded like a well told fairy tale in her adolescent ears.

'You have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.'

Mary is pretty troubled by all this.

She is not yet married and still a virgin.

Yet the angel reassures her this is the work of the Holy Spirit, and finally she accepts it – 'I am the Lord's servant.', she says, 'May it be to me according to your word.'

After a truly confronting week, along with a poor peasant girl from Nazareth, we're told by an angel, 'Nothing is impossible with God.'

And like her, we're challenged to believe it, by believing in the one John calls 'the light', who is coming into the darkened world.

Can we scarce take the angel at his word?

Nothing is impossible with God.

Can we even hear these words properly today?

Luke 1 is full of many beautiful words, Mary's Magnificat of course, as well as Zechariah's song.

It is in fact the longest chapter of the NT – 80 powerful verses in which we hear Luke laying out how this is God's working from beginning to end.

It is a profound telling of how God's story is about to become intimately tied up with our own in a new and astonishing way, so we better get ready.

Yet when it comes down to it, it tells a story about an event, an encounter, a happening, just as Mary had an encounter with the angel.

And while John will say in the opening to his Gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word...', it is only as the word became flesh, that the fullness of what God was up to, started to become clearer.

'Grace and truth, came through Jesus Christ.', John goes on to say.

Grace and truth came in human flesh.

The world encounters God's new day in a form it knows well – in human form, in a child in a manger.

The eternal Word became flesh.

This is the divine gesture that will change the world forever.

And for all our rejoicing at Christmas time, we do well to remember the end of the story as well... when all the brokenness of the world was exacted in the cross of Christ.

God's gestures speak of love all the way down.

It is ultimately a life, not a set of words, that narrates the story of God's care for the world and challenges us to change and participate in our own way in this trajectory of love.

A presence, an encounter, Emmanuel – God with us.

Nothing is impossible with God.

We cannot see love, of course, just as we cannot see trust, but we can see the consequences of it.

We can say love, but it is really only when we see it in action that the theme begins to truly sing, and our words have any weight.

Over the course of this difficult week just imagine the gestures of love we've seen.

Many cards have been written, I imagine, and left in Martin Place, but it's the vision of a sea of flowers that captures our attention and speaks to us: queues stretching back and back and people patiently waiting to make their offering.

The vision of strangers embracing amid tears in a shared grief in the street.

The vision of a Pakistani teenager standing up to receive the Nobel Peace prize having been shot for simply seeking an education.

People of all walks of life and all creeds offering to ride alongside anyone who feels threatened on our public transport.

What power there is in simply being with each other as a way of saying, you are not alone.

Another day will dawn.

A new horizon will emerge.

And you need not be afraid.

Is it possible that the God of love who came to be with us in the flesh, might just be bound up in some of these gestures of human loving as well?

And that perhaps if we're looking closely enough we might come to realise our lives themselves have something very important to say, if we'll only let them?

Imagine what power Mary's faithfulness in accepting the angel's word and promise has exacted over the years?

The faithful acceptance of ordinary people that even in the simplest ways – an embrace, a handshake, a gentle coming alongside, a thoughtful presence, a living out of our commitments of faith – can confront the tragedy of our world and speak of a better way.

You are not alone.

Nothing is impossible with God.

It is at such times that the idea of the church makes the most sense.

This strange company of the faithful.

Not the meetings and business and mechanics of it, which even I'll admit are necessary, but now, here.

The people of God together to celebrate and rejoice the greatest gesture of love the world has ever known.

The coming of Christ.

Your being here is itself in a smaller way part of that larger gesture of grace.

You may not know it or think it.

You may not ever have imagined that your coming to church speaks to others before a single thing is said.

You may not have realised that your life, your faith, your simple presence, which you've always considered pretty standard and innocuous, has something profound to say.

That it is itself a gesture of love, if you'll let it be.

Mary's gesture was to carry the Christ child into the world.

As I'm sure we all would have, she hesitated, yet in the end faithfully accepted that her ordinary existence was laden with divine potential.

Nothing is impossible with God.

I've heard people in recent times say things which seem to imply the church doesn't need weekly worship anymore, weekly coming together to be the people of God at prayer.

What utter nonsense.

It is in this time before a word is spoken, by our very presence that we stand with one another in the way of God's love, so that together, we pray, we also say something to the world.

And speak into its often tragic existence.

We hope and pray that through God's grace our words and gestures come together to forge a powerful witness to Christ.

So that we become little signs which point in another direction.

I started off saying that speaking in the aftermath of the week we've had runs the risk of becoming clichéd.

And maybe speaking of the difference loving gestures can make skirts on the edge of that a little.

But maybe that's because gestures aren't supposed to be spoken of, at least not in that sense.

They're supposed to be offered, as it were, in the flesh.

Person to person, community to community.

God doesn't just speak about coming to be with us.

In Christ, he actually does so.

It's not only possible, but real.

For so many people this Christmas will be coloured more with sadness than joy.

And maybe for you too there are things personally which will make this a hard and challenging time, let alone the overlay of the events of the world.

You need not face this struggle alone.

You are not alone.

By our presence this day, here, and now, we want to say, the peace of the Lord be with you, for Jesus is coming into the world once more.

And in that we might rejoice.

It is in his coming that God says to us all, 'By my presence, I will save you.'

In a week of heartache and bad news, here, then, is the good.

Not a word, per se, but a presence, a life, an embrace, and all we can do is share it one to another.

This is truly what Christmas is all about.

God bless the memory of the innocent who have died, God be with all who suffer, and may God's love rest with us all at this time and always.

Amen.