

Readings

Select Readings Luke 1-2

Anna's Christmas

Greetings in the name of the Holy One, giver of life presence of love.

I come to you tonight sharing your joy, honoured by the gift of your celebration. Every Christmas I am delighted to see how my Grandson continues to draw people together to sing of love, and God and grace. His story is a dear one isn't it. And yet I have to admit celebration was the furthest thing from our mind when this story first took place.

Oh it still pains me when I recall my initial reaction.

See my little Mary was my first born child and my only daughter. I had trouble conceiving in the first place and then I nearly died giving her birth and for all those reasons I treasured as she grew. Mary was a special child. Oh I know I'm not supposed to say that and if her brothers heard me they would both be hurt and respond in kind.

You see, Mary was no doubt the first born. She was always keeping her brothers in line, making sure they were on the right path. She could get a little bossy - you know how the oldest can be. Mary was always in control of things - and yet it seems her heart was always in the right place.

She was such a blessing. The first time my sister Elizabeth met her she said "God has big plans for this one Anna." I can sense it "This one's gonna change the world" she said. It wasn't long before I saw it too. When she was young I thought it was just my mothers heart but now I know God had a special plan for my little Angel.

Yes Mary was one of those children who was not afraid to speak her mind. If she saw someone being picked on she would be the first to step in and confront the bullies.

And you did not dare beat your animals in her presence - and if you did you were guaranteed a talking to about loving all of God's creatures.

Oh I can't even count how many wounded animals, or crying children she brought home over the days.

And then there was her faith. Mary had a faith that I could only long for. She loved to go to synagogue and she was more faithful than any of us with her prayers. But her faith wasn't just religion or spirituality it was her life. She took the messages of the prophets to heart. She not only recited the Shema day and night she lived it "Love the lord your God with all your heart, soul and might" she would respond if we ever questioned her for being over caring, or serving

others beyond what was necessary. "God wants us to love with everything we've got" she would say.

Mary lived as if the Holy guided her every step of the way. There wasn't a person who didn't experience her love and acceptance - not a soul. Mary loved everyone and everyone loved Mary.

So, It didn't surprise me that when she was only twelve - barely a woman Joseph approached my husband, and asked to take Mary as his wife. I wasn't ready to let her go but Joachim convinced me Joseph was a good man. And I could see in Mary's sparkling eyes that she believed it too.

And so in reluctance I agreed - I had no choice really - the decision had been made. But I have to admit that as the next months and days were lived out I pulled out guilt trips like every Jewish mother is capable of and I said to my beloved more than once "I told you she wasn't ready."

You probably know where the story is going from here. But I don't know if you can imagine the impact this turn of events had on our precious innocent family.

I knew when I saw Mary sitting alone in the garden that night gazing at the stars that there was something different in her spirit. At first I thought she must be praying again, but then I noticed that at times she seemed to be watching the neighbourhood children playing across the way with a new intensity. Usually she would go over and play along and so knowing something was different I went and sat beside her.

We sat in silence for what must have felt like an eternity to Mary until she whispered. "Momma, I'm pregnant."

In that moment my world both stopped dead and spun out of control. In the blink of an eye more thoughts rushed through my head and heart than could ever be counted. I had so much to say but no words came out. I wanted to get up and run but my body wouldn't move. And then after what seemed like an eternity to me I turned to my Mary expecting to see a face full of tears and instead I saw a glow, a radiance, a hope, even a joy that words could not express.

And slowly she began to tell me her story. She told me that an Angel had appeared to Joseph also. I listened. My head and my heart took a long time to get to the same place. I wanted to trust my child but I was not naive. I knew how these things happened. I was a learned woman and I knew the ways of the world. I wanted to trust my child but I didn't yet trust Joseph.

And as my little Angel told her stories of angels my head spun in disappointment and despair.

And my despair turned to fear and anger when we told her father the news. Joachim wanted to give Joseph the punishment set for Mary - I'll stone him he raged. "No one puts my daughter in danger!" "This can't be happening" he thundered "I will throw my body in front of any one who wants to throw a rock at my daughter."

“Daddy please stop” Mary cried. Listen Daddy, listen Momma she said. You know me. You have always trusted me. Look at me - I’m your little Angel. Remember.

But my heart had been shattered into a thousand jagged pieces. I long to take back that night. I dream of the way things should have been.

Oh we expressed our fear and our anger her father and I. I’d be embarrassed to know if anyone else witnessed our normally peaceful little home that evening. It took a long time before Joachim and I could even face Joseph. But when we began to look and listen we discovered a strength in him we hadn’t known before. We heard his story and realized the love he had for our Mary. We saw how Mary trusted him, not as someone who had violated her but as someone she loved.

I have to admit that Joachim and I still don’t fully understand the story but what we do know is that for all their lives Mary, Joseph and my grandson Jesus lived in truth and faith and God and justice and love. As so as we began to glimpse that truth we decided to at least try to trust.

So we arranged for Mary to go be with my sister Elizabeth. She and Zachariah would keep Mary safe while she became visibly pregnant. We said Mary had gone to help Elizabeth with her pregnancy - which knowing my little girl she did. It was Elizabeth who began to help our hearts change. She said that when Mary arrived the baby in her womb ‘jumped for joy.’ And then she reminded us that she had always said God had great plans for this one. But, Oh those month were hard. Keeping silent. fearing for her life.

And then the news of the census came. Can you believe it? Caesar Augustus wanted to count people as if they were his cattle? Everyone had to journey with their partners to the home of their lineage. I didn’t want her to go. But once again Mary didn’t weaken. She was not afraid. And Joseph cared for her as if the baby she was carrying was God himself.

They began the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It was not an easy one Mary so heavy with child. And I her mother stayed home praying for her day and night. I was afraid the baby might be born early especially with the pressures of the journey.

And then one evening as I stood in the cool of the night air and gazed longingly up at the starry sky the heavens seemed to realign. The gentle breeze seemed to be singing a lullaby of joy. And I knew the child had been born. I ran in to Joachim and begged him to journey with me to see the baby but he assured me once again that Joseph was a good man and he would care for Mary and our grandson and for the first time deep in my heart I knew it was true.

I can’t remember how long it was before they returned but when they did we heard the stories angels, shepherds, and the star that you all know so well. I am glad however I wasn’t there to see my precious child give birth in a barn. I don’t think I could have handled that. But she assures

me that God was with her in that stable and she always knew holy comfort and peace. Oh, she giggles when she hears the stories of silent nights and gentle mangers - it wasn't quite like that. Oh there was the stench and the noise of the clucking chickens and the mooing cows. And straw although it can be made to do it did not provide ideal comfort or sanitation for birthing on.

But the baby. Jesus - God saves they called him. That baby from the moment you saw him you knew he truly was going to save the world. I can't explain it but when he looked into your eyes your very soul was moved. When you were in his presence you felt hope, and joy, peace and love. Everyone felt it. Everyone knew this child was special. Oh I could tell you more stories of strangers and travelers that came to see him along the way but you have heard some of those as well.

And now you know too that Jesus who's life began in turmoil and potential tragedy grew up to be a man. A prophet - many later came to believe he was the messiah himself. I know I do. Because for me my grandson was emmanuel - God with us. He lived, taught and loved like no other. Even more so than my angel Mary. Jesus lived exactly as the Holy created him to be. He lived as God's son here on earth.

The universe shifted the moment Jesus was born, shifted toward the reality of God's presence in and with us.

Jesus touched people in ways that made them whole. Jesus didn't care who you were. He didn't look at people and evaluate them on societal status, faith or religion. Jesus just lived in love and justice. He longed for everyone to know they were loved by God and he lived out that love for every person and every part of creation. And as you remember him this day he longs for you too to be whole. And now we are faced with the task of making real that revolutionary love, here and now, in the time and place we belong to. Christmas present should look different and better than Christmas past.

For Jesus longs for you to know hope, peace, joy, love and grace that abides beyond all measure. And That's the true story of a not so simple birth, on a very holy night. That's the true story of the birth of a babe who lived to change our world.