

Sermon Archive 515

Wednesday 25 December, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

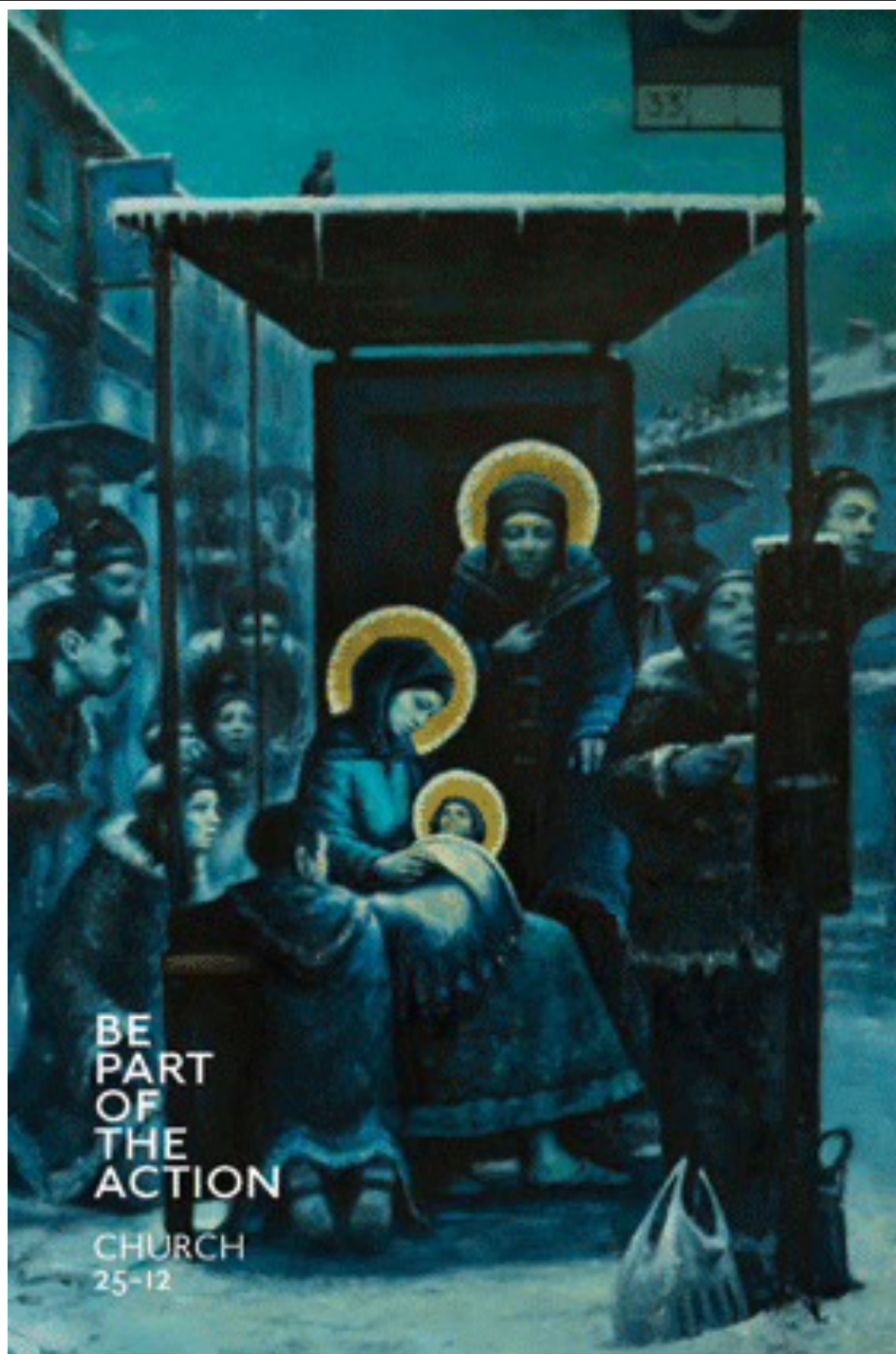
Reflections for Christmas Day

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



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Part One: Maria at the bus stop

One Tuesday morning, I wanted to get into work a bit earlier than usual, to get a few extra things done before all the regular Tuesday things called for attention. I wasn't a whole lot earlier - not like I got up at the crack of dawn. Maybe half an hour, or three quarters of an hour earlier. I found myself sitting at the bus stop then with a slightly different cohort from the usual Tuesday morning one. One of them started chatting to me. No, she wasn't a door-to-door salesperson. She wasn't selling religion. She had lovely eyes and a warm, open manner. She asked me what I did. I asked her where she was going. We commented that it was really warm in the bus - indeed the bus driver shouted something in our direction about the heater being stuck on and how there was nothing he could do about it. She saw that I was in a shirt, woollen vest and leather jacket - and called me "you poor thing". She suggested that we might get off the hot bus, and do the rest of the journey in a cooler one that soon would follow. But I had to get to work to tend to my extra few tasks. On reflection, I wonder whether she might have been angling to extend our conversation for a wee bit longer. As she got off the bus a few stops before I did, I asked her for her name. She was Maria. On the bus, I had been speaking to Maria.

The next Tuesday, although I didn't have extra little jobs that necessitated going to church early, I went to the bus stop at the earlier time. Anyone hearing this story might think that I was doing that in order to talk again to Maria. I couldn't possibly suggest that that might have been the case. I didn't see her again. That's kind of the nature of bus stops, I suppose. All sorts of people pass through them on their criss-crossing trips from here to there and now to then. The expression of a busy place is that it's like a train station - but we could equally well call it a "bus stop".

We understand that Jesus was born in a stable, offered to Mary (we've been speaking to Mary) and Joseph, for whom there was no room in the inn. So why an artist might want to draw a nativity scene in a bus stop is a bit of a mystery.

I guess that Mary and Joseph **were** on a journey when it was time for the child to be born - so a bus stop kind of expresses something of the "on the run" that was true for them. Stable nativity scenes can look fairly cozy, fairly contained, fairly settled. Maybe a bus stop is more true to people away from home. Interestingly, according to the story the new little family didn't return home. They kept on travelling to Egypt, where it was considered to be safer than Nazareth that was run by an insane king who wanted to kill all the new

baby boys. The bus stop's not a destination - more of a point along the way. Shepherds, visitors from the East, even the "oxen lowing" are characters who pass - whom we probably never will see again. I was talking to **Maria** - the shepherds and wise men talk to **Mary** - and then she'll be gone. It's the bus stop.

Many people in the drawing are just outside the bus stop, but are looking through the tensile glass to see what's happen there. Not much is happening. It's just a woman with a child on her knee, and a man (maybe the father) positioned beside / behind them - looking cold (look at how he's pulling his garments close around his chest). There will, of course, be rumours about whether he *is* the father, but no one in this scene is going to be thinking about that.

One woman isn't noticing the family at all. With a piece of paper in her hands, she's consulting the timetable on the pole. Another person - just next to her seems to be reaching out his left arm - maybe signalling the driver of the bus he wants to take. These two figures remind us that the bus stop isn't a place for bonding, or staying, let alone for worshipping and adoring. So goodness knows what the figure is at the front left, kneeling and taking a close look at the baby. We see the soles of his shoes. He's definitely kneeling. Maybe he stands for all those who sense in this birth that something has happened for everyone. I wonder if he's framing that question: tell us what your name is - be our hope again.

With all its various players, taking on their different positions relative to the family, the nativity features us. The birth that has happened - it is for us. This is a picture of the fulfilment of that old hope of the people - that God will be with us. In the bus stop, this is "God with Us".

Reading: Matthew 1: 18-23

Part Two: Christmas comes for everyone, everyone alive

Most of the people at the bus stop are never named. We don't know who they are. See, I'm sitting next to you, and having a guess. You look about the age and size of the person who stole my car last year. They never caught you, but we worked out from how far forward you'd pulled the driver's seat how tall you weren't. From the lolly papers on the floor, we formed the view that you weren't in your seventies. So I'm kind of looking at you, profiling you. Who am I meeting here? Criminals will, of course, feature in the story. One

of the left and one on the right. One called Barabbas, released after the crowd called out his name. Tell me what **your** name is, friend. Who **is** this in the bus stop. Am I willing to sing the line for you "This year, this year, let the day arrive / when Christmas comes for everyone, everyone alive!"

And how about the one beyond you? What's your name? Who are we meeting here? There's this advertising campaign on TV. Although you'd never know it, it says, this person has just saved someone who's had a vehicle accident. Although you'd never know it, this one is keeping a teenage boy alive - a rare genetic condition means he needs new blood every week. Although you'd never know it, this one is saving a mother and baby whose birth has become complicated. Although you'd never know it. The advertisement is for the New Zealand Blood service. People who give blood are silent, hidden heroes. You wouldn't be able to pick them at the bus stop. I hope the Nativity baby never ends up becoming a hero by giving his blood. Well, you know what I mean. Who are you people in the bus stop? What are your names? For you (although I do not know who you are) I sing the line: "This year, this year, let the day arrive / when Christmas comes for everyone, everyone alive!"

And you? Way down the end of the stop, standing rather than sitting, even though there are some spaces here on the bench, maybe you've found it easier to keep a distance. You're wearing a wonderful colourful outfit - all bright colours and very foreign. You're not from here, are you? I am white, and you are black. I am male, and you are female. I am getting older; you seem young. I speak English - how about you? Those who like to slice the demographic up into wee bits, would tend to call you "my opposite". If I were inclined towards prejudice, they'd call you my "other". Here's the thing. If I were to be picked up and dropped off in a stable in Bethlehem, I'd be the odd one out. What is this sense of the other? Especially when we're daring to call the child "God with us". "This year, this year, let the day arrive / when Christmas comes for everyone, everyone alive!" And then maybe we can become the people of God who is with "US".

Who is the child? A star child, an earth child? A street child, or beat child? Hurt child, or used child? Sad child, lost child? Spared child, spoiled child? Wise child, faith child? Hope-for-peace child, star of stars that shine. This year, this year, let the day arrive / when Christmas comes for everyone, everyone alive!"

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