

Christmas and the environment

Sermon, Sunday 23 December 2018 Cashmere Presbyterian Church, Silvia Purdie

This week we must bid a fond farewell to this. The plastic supermarket shopping bag will be no more. I feel like it's kind of a shame. I've rather taken them for granted through my life, and found all sorts of ways to reuse them for rubbish and wrapping around flowers and carrying salads for pot luck teas. But no more. They are, as we know, bad for our environment.

The problem with this most useful thing is that it is just too indestructible. It will outlast us – when you, me, and even Estelle are long gone this supermarket shopping bag will still exist, lying around in a rubbish pile along with millions and millions of others just like it.

My body is subject to the laws of nature. My body will decay. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, our physical bodies will return into the cycle of life. Plastic does not.

Which is exactly why it is so darned useful to us, and why we make so much of it. Because it does not dissolve or rot. Which makes it a great friend as well as a terrible enemy. And, darn it, it's really cheap to make, so we keep on churning it out and buying it and using it and then throwing it away. And then it flows down into our rivers and the sea, as things do, and tangles up our fish and fills their stomachs with crumbs of plastic, unimaginable amounts of the stuff. All for our convenience.

I confess I've become a little allergic to the stuff. This Christmas I could hardly bear to touch plastic tinsel, and so I did not hang any in my house. I did not want a plastic tree, so I bought a nice tall native pot plant and hung my decorations on that instead.

The problem is, Christmas has become bad for our environment. Millions of children the world over will be given plastic toys which will quickly break and be thrown in the bin, mountains of rubbish, used for a few minutes or hours and then taking hundreds of years to break down.

Santa is the god of the disposable. Santa is lord of shopping and wrapping and tinsel. You know he is coloured red and white because these are the colours of Coka Cola.

Our Santa myth drives our consumer world. In the Santa myth the elves manufacture and produce from an infinity of resources, with no care or concern with what happens to all the stuff once it's delivered.

Our world is not an infinity of resources. Our world cannot cope with all the stuff we are throwing away.

I'm sorry. I'm not trying to make you feel bad, especially at Christmas time. Or maybe I am trying to make you feel bad, because actually I think we have to feel bad. It's not OK for this to be somebody else's problem. All of us, every human on the planet, has a share in this problem, and in finding solutions.

I wish the solutions were easier. I wish I could buy sushi without the plastic box. I like my polyfill duvet on my bed. I like the zip-lock bags I get apricots and sesame seeds in – they work really well. Unfortunately the solutions require us to make changes to our lifestyles. Like carrying our own bags into the supermarket, but far more than that. And making changes to how we live requires of us changes to how we think, what we like, and what we want. It takes us into our values, even our faith.

For if we truly believe, not in Santa and the glory of shopping and glitter, but in Jesus Christ, born in the manger ... what then?

Can we seek a different glory, a hidden, plainer glory that shines in simple things? Can we see with different eyes?

For this, we need Mary. We need her eyes to see.

Mary met with an angel ... not in public, the mall or the temple. She didn't book in or pay for an angel visitation. The angel met her when she was alone, doing ... actually we don't know what she was doing but it was probably something ordinary that she did every day. One of my favourite paintings of the Annunciation has her hanging out the washing.

God broke in to her world, in a very private personal way, and totally changed how she saw the world.

After thinking about it for a while, she translated this glimpse of God-reality into a public declaration, which is recorded for us by Luke, in what we call the Magnificat, which we have heard today.

My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my saviour.

Sadly we lose the word 'magnify' in the Good News translation. It can be translated 'praise', as we heard this morning. Or 'exalt'.

It is the Greek word 'megaluno', from which we still use the 'mega' bit. As in Mitre 10 Mega. It means to lift up, to make bigger, to add greatness, to grow, extend

Sadly the secular Christmas magnifies the rubbish heaps, the piles of plastic waste.

It also magnifies our waist-lines!

If only we could rediscover how to magnify the Lord, and what that would look like at Christmas time. When Mary got a glimpse of God in a radical new way, she looked at everything in a new way ... and she could see the rich people being tipped out of their fancy chairs and poor people being well fed.

Can I dwell a moment more with this word magnify. Megaluno. It means literally, to make something or someone bigger. Like with a magnifying glass, or the zoom on your phone. Then the meaning extends to praise ... so when I tell Rosemary what a wonderful thoughtful insightful job she did with her tribute to Frances on Monday on your behalf, I am 'magnifying' Rosemary, which she indeed deserves. It is good and important to lift each other up, in the church and in our families. I hope this week brings you many moments for praising and exalting, thanking and patting on the back the people in your life; for the people in your life need these words of encouragement from you. It is part of our calling as people of faith to have faith in all those that God has brought into our lives, and to build them up.

But when it comes to 'magnifying' God, I find this harder to get my head around. Surely God is infinite in majesty already. How can I magnify what is already vastly more vast than I can grasp?

How can we exalt or lift up God who is already high and mighty and beyond and great?

It feels like a difficult question, but perhaps the answer is easy: as we praise God we are the ones who grow. As we lift up the name of Jesus, we ourselves are lifted up. As Mary magnified the Lord she herself was magnified, enlarged (literally!) as she accepted the very presence of God in her own being.

At Christmas time we focus our gaze in one tiny spot, a baby lying in a manger. And somehow this tiny spot magnifies all of God's unutterable greatness.

How does that even work?

Somehow all of the created world is gathered up in the manger, the earthiness of straw and sheep. And somehow all of the human world is gathering up around the manger, man and wife, shepherds and kings, from one end to the other of human society. And somehow all of God is present there.

We are magnified as we give glory to God. We are enlarged as we gather around the holy mystery of the manger. We share in the life of God as we give praise to Jesus Christ, born in a manger, friend to us sinners, saviour of all the earth.

This is the Christian faith. This is where we begin to tackle the huge problems facing our world today. This is where we are blessed and inspired to make changes in how we live, as individuals and as global community, so that the earth too may be blessed by us and not buried under mountains of our rubbish.