

Day of Reflection, November 12th, Our Lady of Kapiti Church, Paraparaumu, led by Joy Cowley

Joy ran the day as three sessions, each opened with a talk from her followed by a period of about 20 mins silent reflection for us all. She examined the period in Mary's life from Annunciation to the Birth of Christ.

The first session was called "Call" and Mary's reaction to the appearance of the Angel with a life changing proposition was likely Joy thought to be "bewilderment". - What is this all about? what will happen? Why me? How will I manage? We were asked to consider the shock and challenge to Mary of the Annunciation and its consequences, and to Joseph of her pregnancy. Then we had to apply this to our own lives. What are the good and bad points in our relationships? What are our challenges in them? (We had about 20 minutes and "sharing" was not expected, though possible if someone wanted to).

She called the next session "Acceptance" and it was all about how Mary and Joseph coped and what happened next. Joy has studied widely as we all know, including Jewish history/philosophy and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Her short talks were full of the insights that she had gained. She started by talking of Mary's childhood and here she referred to Catholic tradition of which her studies supported.

There is no biblical evidence that Mary was dedicated to the temple and studied there as a child - it's a Catholic tradition. I can confirm that it is long held because my old school had a copy of a Renaissance painting showing Mary entering the temple as a little girl, alone with her parents waving her on. Mary would have had to leave the Temple at about 12 when her period started. Joy assumes she was the child of older parents and various references in the Bible lead her to believe the family were Essenes.

Their practice was to appoint a guardian for young single women, a mature man of good repute i.e. Joseph (Catholic tradition has him as an older man: Joy thinks he could have been a widower with an existing family, which covers the reference to Jesus' brethren that crop up when she visits his home town synagogue). As Mary's guardian, Joseph's responsibility would have included morals too - hence his dismay and wish for a quiet divorce, personal feelings aside, Joseph had been found to be an inefficient guardian. We had to put ourselves in their situation, imagine their feelings and how they would work through the change to their plans and assumptions, and deal with the discomfort and mental stress. Our quiet time was to assess our personal character and present responses to our person challenges. We had to identify what is holding us back and what we personally feared. Now was the time for good resolutions.

We all were deep in thought and didn't notice how time was passing. Joy was just about to continue when someone (Christine or Susan) suggested that it was passed lunchtime according to our programme. It was tactfully agreed that we all felt uncomfortable eating lunch in Church. So we went over the hall to the room where we had the Conference, took our masks off and sat around the tables as if we were in a café.

In the pause before we resumed, we were encouraged to go out the back door and admire the Garden and Calvary being planted. One can dedicate a tree and deposit loved ones' ashes, and there are Stations of the Cross along the wall. It was rather windy so inspecting them was a step too far for me - I'd have lost my voice. Over the fence is a wetland reserve and Christine Fogden said pukeko were frequent visitors. This I can confirm as I'd been watching one during part of the morning. In the afternoon a cute little rabbit visited the garden. Big windows can be a distraction in Church.

Our third session was called "Birthing of Jesus to the world." Joy reminded us that God is all around and in everything. Every person is like a clay vessel that can contain things but be easily broken. (I think this was one of her Jewish metaphors). Each clay vessel (person) contains a spark of God inside. She asked if any of us had read the "Proto Evangelium" of James the Less. We hadn't - maybe we should. It contains information about Christ's early life and his family that leads her to the conclusion that they were Essenes. If one accepts this there is much about the Gospels that is explained. The sect baptised with water (as did John the Baptist). Joy has always wondered about Nazareth, especially after she learned that archaeologist have found remains of a Canaanite settlement and then bare ground until a medieval village.

The Essenes were an alternative culture to the Pharisees and Sadducees we read about in the Gospels and who were so very opposed to Jesus. An alternative name for Essene is Nazarites and they had a village quite close to Jerusalem. Joy has always wondered about the practicality of Mary walking to see her cousin Elizabeth in Jerusalem over a route that later was the site for the Good Samaritan parable. It wouldn't have been safe for a young woman.

A village just outside Jerusalem, she thinks, is a better fit for the Biblical story. Also fits the gibe "can anything good come out of Nazareth" spoke at Christ and recorded in the Gospels. She asked us to reconsider the bad press the innkeeper gets for putting Mary and Joseph in the stable to have the baby. Inns tended to be noisy; we know these one in Bethlehem were crowded; there would have been some privacy in the stable. (*The only one of her jokes I can remember: - the shepherds on the hill saw a light in the stable and, fearing some criminal activity went to investigate. The window was high so one of them had to climb on another's shoulders for a discrete look in. He saw Mary and the new baby etc and exclaimed "Jesus Christ!". Mary looked up and remarked "That's a nice name."*)

Essenes said the strict Temple Jews were "sons of darkness" while they themselves were "sons of Light." This explains many of the references to "light" in Christ's preaching. We were asked in our meditation to consider if what holds us back in our spiritual development and personal relationships is based on "fear". We were asked also to identify our particular fears and ask ourselves if they were any of her suggestions - fear of failure, fear of getting things wrong, fear of getting old, fear of offending or hurting other people... It was suggested that we should also consider how to overcome our fears. We should take consolation from God being all around in everything and his love is boundless. We should seek the spark of God in every person.

So another quiet time for meditation. I have a confession to make here. I haven't overcome the problem of my spectacles steaming up when I wear a mask. I took them off when I didn't need to read or write. Alas this meant focus for me was mostly outside the windows and Joy's patterned dress was a visual challenge. So I shut my eyes. Suddenly I was aware that I was about to drop my pen because I was nodding off. I was directly in front of Joy on the socially distanced second row, so very visible. I hope I didn't incriminate myself by giving a start. Even so I reached a conclusion and made a good resolution to throw out resentful thoughts. It was a valuable day for me.

Anne Lumb November 2021