

## **29<sup>th</sup> December 2024 – Christmas 1**

*An informal reflection for the 'choose your own carol' Eucharist.*

We're going to take a little ramble through today's readings – a bit like the ramble you might go on after Christmas lunch or on Boxing Day, to help the riches of the season go down.

They're wonderful readings, and we don't get to hear some of them very often, so it's worth rambling through all three.

We'll start with the Gospel, that snapshot into Jesus' childhood. He's twelve, and things have settled down a bit since his early years. Maybe Mary and Joseph have relaxed a bit after the excitement and danger of his birth and its immediate aftermath. And then this happens. Most parents will immediately recognise the absolute frantic panic when you think your child has wandered off and got lost in a supermarket or at a fair, and then the overwhelming mix of anger and relief when you find them. For Mary, I wonder if this episode is a cold reminder that she will have to let Jesus go as we will hear at Candlemas in a month's time, 'a sword will pierce her own soul too'. There's a very poignant foretaste of loss in this story, which is an inevitable part of Jesus starting to realise and live out his vocation.

Rewind now to the Old Testament reading – an absolute gem of a story. Another child, another temple, another mother. Hannah prayed to God in desperation for the gift of a child, and when her deepest desire was granted she offered the child back to God in thanksgiving. Here, is a little child, serving in the Temple. He will become the great prophet Samuel, and this is one of the two important snapshots that we see into his childhood, and into his mother's experience of parenthood. Each year she gets to visit him just once, and brings him a new little linen tunic, because he'll have grown out of the last one. I imagine her drawing out the process of making that little tunic so that it takes the whole year. I imagine her pouring her love into every single stitch. Because as he wears it, she wants him to be able to feel the love that went into it. She clothes him with her love.

Which takes us on our ramble to the epistle, that iconic reading from Colossians. I always remind myself that Paul was writing to a community, not to a bunch of individuals, so when he says 'clothe yourselves in love' he

doesn't just mean 'each of you must act lovingly and thus become more virtuous' I think he means that love is so relational that when we all act lovingly the whole community is clothed by that love – maybe literally, and certainly figuratively. Clothing one another is a very embodied image for virtue, so it's no accident that the letter goes on from this to talk about singing together as well – another highly embodied, highly communal activity (in other words, it is embodied for each person, and also embodied for the community, which Paul called the 'body of Christ').

Research shows that singing together affects our biochemistry – research done on close harmony singers showed that singing together was associated with the release of oxytocin. This is the hormone that helps the milk flow when a baby breastfeeds, and the hormone released when you pet your dog and it looks back at you with its big soulful eyes. It is the hormone of love and connection.

Which brings us to the activity of singing hymns and (in our case today) carols together. Our singing is a loving response to the love of God, and at this time of year, especially to the love of God in Christ, the embodied coming of God into the world. Singing connects us with one another and with God and enables us to connect theological truth with emotional and spiritual and, yes, physical experience.

Which means we have concluded our ramble, and it must be time to sing another Carol – so sing your heart out!