

4th Sunday Advent (A)

- It seems ironic that there are people who fear, some are filled with anxiety, maybe even dread, the approach of Christmas - the season of joy.
- It's not Christmas itself that causes this fear, the source of fear lies elsewhere, especially in Australia, where this season merges with the end of the academic & calendar year, summer & school holidays.
- For some it's the hassle & the extra work that makes them fearful.
- For others it's the strain put on their already overstretched finances by the Christmas splurge.
- For others it's fear of the conflicts that sometimes occur in families at Christmas time; & for others it's the fact that Christmas reawakens painful memories – the memory of a death or a tragedy in the past.
- Also where there has been a loss of a loved one, that loss is felt again, intensely, at Christmas; the sight of others surrounded by loved ones reopens a wound - the result for many is an intense loneliness.
- Other's fears may result from advancing age, with the infirmities & sense of mortality this brings with it.
- And then, there's the fear & sadness refugees must feel, having had to escape from their homes, starting a new life from scratch in a foreign land, culture & language into which they now have to fit & make home.
- But those who fear the approach of Christmas can take heart & hope from the story of the first Christmas. There was plenty of fear present in it too.
- In fact, all of the main characters in it were afraid at one time or another.
- Joseph was afraid when he found that Mary was expecting a child even though they hadn't yet lived together.
- But an angel appeared to him in a dream & said to him, 'Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit' – words we hear in today's Gospel; Joseph, the just man, trusted God, & so overcame his fear & did what was right.
- Mary was afraid on hearing the greeting of the angel Gabriel, but the angel said to her, 'Mary, do not be afraid; you have won God's favour.'
- Mary trusted God, & so overcame her fear & said 'Yes' to what he was asking of her.
- The trust of Mary & Joseph enabled Christ to be born to the world.
- And the shepherds were afraid; the Gospel says that when the angel of the Lord appeared to them, & the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were terrified; but the angel said, 'Do not be afraid. Listen, I bring you news of a great joy ... Today a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.'
- They trusted God, went to Bethlehem, saw the Child, & returned to their flocks glorifying & praising God.

- All of us are touched by fear in one way or another at various times in our lives; but we can't allow our fears to cripple & paralyze us.
- Often we can be paralyzed by the fear of change – in our own lives, in society & the church – and sometimes this fear can effectively mean that we collude in practices & structures that are unjust & even evil.
- What we can do is move **from fear to faith**.
- Trust is the thing that enables us to have our fear turn into faith.
- From our own smallness & the fears associated with knowing how inadequate we are, the God of surprises creates greatness.
- Greatness is a relative thing.
- For example, I wonder do you realise your greatness in bringing your children to life & nurturing them to grow; what a great & sacred thing that is! - You share this with Mary & Joseph.
- There's also the great work of nurturing your marriage relationship, & the great work of young people in working out your path in life.
- Each of us starts life as a dependent & vulnerable baby, yet from that smallness look at the person you've become, through the fears, struggles, failures & tragedies.
- There's also the struggle many experience at this time because of the loss of a loved one, or the breakdown of relationships & therefore the sense of grief, loneliness & abandonment – these can also be opportunities for the birth of new life; of growth in the development of your own personal lives without the partnership of the one you have loved & lost.
- Those who seek & attain asylum in a land & among people that were previously foreign & who struggle to make a new life & are welcomed to do so, can move to greatness when they open themselves to faith in others, in opportunities offered, in themselves & in God who raises the lowly.
- When we feel small, weak, inadequate & afraid, we can place ourselves into the hands of God & become great in sharing in God's greatness.
- Fear can be an opportunity, even a grace because it can force us to trust in God rather than in ourselves.
- Let us not allow our fears to prevent us from opening our hearts to the 'great joy' announced to the shepherds by the angel, but to have trust in the one who can transform our fears so he can achieve in us what God seeks to do.
- Our fears immersed in trust, can be the fertile soil for God to plant a seed that can come to life where there seemed only death & paralysis – he can create possibilities we never imagined that we too might be bearers of Christ to the world.