
The Mustard Seed



Armadale Uniting Church

Issue 43, Advent 2023

God is with us

Dreams, stars, a tyrannical ruler and a few truth-seekers – this is the story of Christmas in Matthew’s Gospel. There are no shepherds and no glorious accounts of angels singing on the occasion of his birth. The annunciation of Jesus’ birth from the angel to Mary doesn’t feature, but we do hear about Joseph’s dream about the child. Rather than the sense of joyous anticipation at the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, Matthew’s story is immersed in a sense of danger. King Herod, local ruler (and apparently, megalomaniac) is frightened by the wise men’s prophecy about a newborn King of the Jews and the rest of the story takes place in the shadows of the awful destruction he brings in an attempt to remove the threat of this baby.

Maybe the drama makes this story strange and distant from our lives. But is it? Maybe we do have our own fears, our own experiences of danger. Even if we’re not likely to have such a terrifying character as Herod in our lives – although some still may.

Life sometimes *is* pretty scary. And Matthew reminds us of this in the way he tells the very beginning of the story of Jesus in the world.

Even so, before we even get to Herod, right from Joseph’s first dream we are told that the baby brings something different into this scary and dangerous world. He is Emmanuel, which means ‘God with us.’ There is no way of living in the world which simply denies the difficulty and danger of human life; but even within all of that, this story reminds us, God is with us.

Even the Emmanuel himself knows the fragility of human existence. As a baby he precariously slips through danger by the faithfulness of the people around him, as they discern the guidance of God. And this is just the beginning of a story which we already know heads to the cross, the ultimate assurance that God is with us – in distress, in heartache, in loneliness.

Whether we grit our teeth and soldier through Christmas events with family or organisations which feel fractured, or come to the end of another year feeling spent or longing for absent loved ones, or even if we love all the activity of December and are so caught up in the joy of it that it becomes strangely easier to overlook God. No matter what: God is with us.

This is based on an article by Rev Kylie Crabbe in the Advent 2010 issue of *The Mustard Seed*.

Kylie wrote this article as we were about to enter the Year of Matthew. On Advent Sunday this year (December 3) we enter the Year of Mark.

From the Editors

We are heading into challenging times. We have benefitted greatly from Fiona's time with us but sadly, we have now farewelled her. There are many questions about our future and change is obviously coming.

In the meantime we hope the variety of material in this issue is of interest.

Peace to all this Advent season.

– Bill and Graeme

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The vigorous bronze statue (now somewhat over-shadowed) of John Wesley (1703 – 1791) in front of Wesley Church in Lonsdale Street was presented to the Church in 1935 to mark the centenary of Methodism in Victoria. It was commissioned by the Cato family who ran a chain of grocery stores. The sculptor was Paul Montford, who is represented by a number of other works around Melbourne, including at the Shrine and the war memorial statue in the ground floor lobby of the Malvern Town Hall (dating from 1927).

Farewell to Fiona

On Sunday October 1, Fiona led us in a service of Holy Communion which concluded her seven years of ministry at Armadale. How quickly those seven years seem to have gone! The formal cutting of ties was conducted by the Rev. Professor Tom Spurling, representing the Presbytery of Port Philip East. At the same service we also said farewell to Jane Yun, who had been with us since March as a candidate for the ministry of deacon. After the service we all shared a lovely lunch and Hugh Luxford provided music.

The day was an occasion of mixed emotions. We expressed our thanks to God for leading Fiona to us. Also our sadness at losing her friendship and special gifts of leadership and pastoral care. In these we have all been blessed. Fiona is a very special person, wise, courageous and always of good cheer. She leaves us with our love and best wishes for the future.



MICAH THE PROPHET

In his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, Walter Brueggemann suggests that the prophets of Israel were about two things. Their ministry included both *criticizing* and *energizing*.

Micah's prophecy begins with legal language. His critique is a word of disaster, destruction, and calamity for both Israel and Judah.

He singles out Samaria and Jerusalem the respective capitals of the northern and southern kingdoms, and by implication the unique centres of influence for their nations. More particularly, he targets the upper crust, the intelligentsia, and the cultural elite of these cities.

Micah calls the nation's religious leaders false prophets. In turn, they give Micah the same treatment that Amos and Jeremiah received: "Do not prophesy about these things; disgrace will not overtake us". The religious leaders were peddling the worst sort of false comforts.

Invoking bitter sarcasm, Micah says that the perfect prophet for these people is a liar and a deceiver. "Her prophets teach for a price, and her prophets tell fortunes for money, yet they lean upon the Lord and say, "Is not the Lord among us? No disaster will come upon us".

He then turns to the civic and cultural elite. These leaders "tear the skin from my people" and "break their bones in pieces" (3:2-3). They despise justice, distort the right, take bribes as a matter of course, and are "skilled at doing evil with both hands". Making it worse, the religious leaders sanctioned this; they legitimized the status quo and said it was God's will.

Contrary to all the false promises, disaster did overtake Israel as Micah had predicted. Assyria invaded the north and Babylon ravaged the southern kingdom. But just when his prophetic critique feels like too much to bear, Micah energizes God's people with words of hope.

First, he speaks about a remnant. True, disaster fell upon the nation as a whole, but out of this forced exile would come a remnant. Out of the ruins, God will bring a measure of restoration and renewal. Micah promises that in some future day "many nations" will come, not just Israel and Judah, and "they will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks". This future salvation would include a messiah or anointed one, promised by Micah to come from tiny Bethlehem (5:2, quoted in Matthew 2:6).

Then, Micah gives to Israel two of the most memorable passages in all of Scripture. In the first one he reminds them of the nature of true religion. It consists not of outward forms but of inner transformation. "*He has showed you O Man what it is to be good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God*".

Finally, after all of his fire and brimstone, Micah reminds Israel of God's never-ending grace. Even today, every year Micah's words are read by Jews on *Yom Kippur*, the Day of Atonement, the holiest day of the year in Judaism.

Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of His inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy (7:18).

Micah's last word is an evocative reminder of the energizing hope God offers to us all.

Dan Clendenin *Who is a God like You?* (abridged) *Journey with Jesus*. January 22, 2023.

Do simple things well.
St David of Wales

Rublev's *Old Testament Trinity*

Audrey Rublev (1360s – 1430) was a monk and painter associated with Moscow and central Russia while it was under Tatar rule (the Russian name for the Mongols).

Rublev's pivotal achievement is Old Testament Trinity icon (below). It is regarded as one of the highest achievements of Russian art. It's also known as The Hospitality of Abraham.



Looking at the icon, we see three figures, richly clad, seated yet strangely arranged. They're placed around a table, in the form of a circle (the symbol of eternity). Although they are not really identifiable, they're obviously angels (notice the wings). But we can't tell if they're old or young, male or female (although beardless). In the background are a house or pavilion, a tree and a curving mountain top.

On the table is a chalice with a splash of red, which once held a sacrificial calf's head.

So, what's going on here? There used to be an inscription stating that it was the Holy Trinity, so why do we see angels? This is because the three persons of God (Father, Son and Holy

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Rublev (cont)

Spirit) cannot be depicted directly in Orthodoxy (“No man hath seen God at any time”, John 1:18, and also Exodus 33: 20). Hence a symbolic representation is required. For this Orthodoxy has long chosen the story where the Lord appears to Abraham on the plains of Mamre while sitting in his tent door, in the form of three men who Abraham welcomes with a meal which they eat under the tree (Genesis 18: 1 – 8). This is an ancient iconic theme in Christian art, known as the Hospitality of Abraham.

In this sense the three angels represent the Trinity, the pavilion in the background represents Abraham's “tent”, the tree the Oak of Mamre (Genesis 18: 8) and the mountain possibly the place where Isaac was to be sacrificed. Traditionally, the centre angel is taken to represent Christ (hand is pointing to the chalice, representing suffering) The left hand figure is generally taken to be the Father and the right hand one the Holy Spirit.

Rublev is acknowledged as the supreme medieval Russian painter of icons and frescos. Not a lot is known about him, but in his book *Andrey Rublev - The Artist and His World*, Prof Milner-Gulland tells us about Rublev and his times. Rublev's life span (1360s – 1430) coincides with a pivotal time in Russian history, while the Russians were under what they call “the Tatar yoke”. Moscow was cementing its position as leader amongst the various principalities and it was also the era when there was a push northwards to establish monasteries.

See Robin Milner-Gulland, *Andrey Rublev : the artist and his world*, Reaktion Books , 2023



There's a reproduction of this icon outside the Minister's office at the Church.

The Hospitality of Abraham is also depicted in other icons and frescos, including the one (at left) in the Basilica of San Vitale, at Ravenna. This probably pre-dates Rublev's work.

Christmas Services

At the time of publication, we have not been able to finalise details of our Advent/Christmas services. We'll post details on our website as soon as we can.

<https://armadale.ucavictas.org.au>

YOU ARE WELCOME FOR BREAKFAST!

Women's Breakfast: On the 2nd Friday of the month. Contact Margo Anderson for details 0447 035 355

Men's Breakfast: On the first Friday of the month. Contact Graeme Harris for details 9504 8234

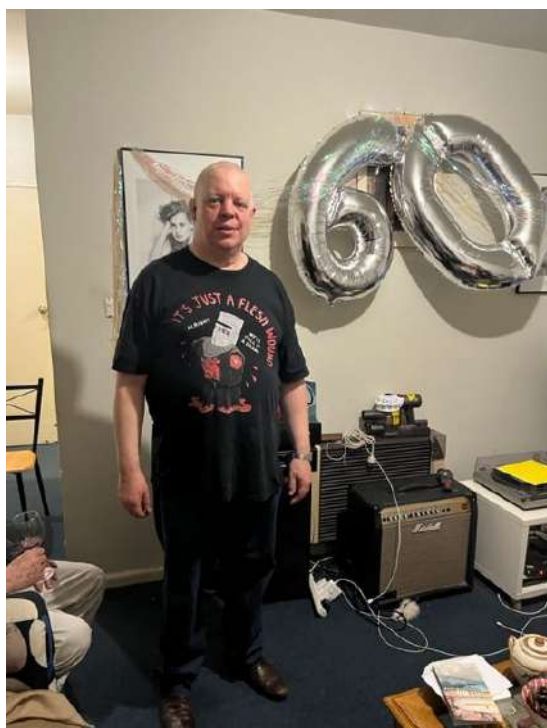
Around Armadale



(left) Jane preached on "forgiveness" on 17 September. We had a "Safe Church" discussion on 10 September (below)



We have been fortunate that Karel has led worship on a number of occasions (right). Hugh L celebrated a big birthday (below).



ADVENT PRAYER

In our secret yearnings
we wait for your coming
and in our grinding despair
we grant that you will.
And in this privileged space
we are surrounded by witnesses who yearn more than we do
and by those who despair more deeply than we do.
Look upon your church and its pastors
in this season of hope to the bottom of our toes
which runs so quickly to fatigue
and in this season of yearning
which becomes so easily quarrelsome.
Give us the grace and the impatience
to wait for your coming to the bottom of our toes,
to the edges of our fingertips.
We do not want our several worlds to end.
Come in your power
and come in your weakness
in any case,
and make all things new.
Amen.

Walter Brueggemann

ALEXANDER SOLZHENITSYN

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, writer, thinker, and Orthodox Christian wrote the following in his book *The Gulag Archipelago* in response to the question of evil and how we respond to it. This was after eight years of imprisonment and exile for private criticisms he made of Stalin.

“If only it were so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere, insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

Solzhenitsyn’s observation echoes quite strongly what Jesus said quite strongly in Matthew 7:

“Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother ‘Let me take the speck out of your eye’ when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother’s eye.

If you haven’t any charity in your heart, you have the worst kind of heart trouble.

Bob Hope

A Reading History

Bill Rush

I am pretty sure I was able to read a little before I went to school. I remember an Australian book titled 'Dick Digt on the Barrier Reef', which had coloured drawings of a boy swimming among multi-coloured fish, coral and mermaids. Another favourite was *The Story of Little Black Sambo*, printed long before the age of political correctness began. While the title has definite racist overtones today, Sambo was represented in this book as a hero. With intelligence and deft footwork, he was able to turn four menacing tigers into butter.

Most children living in Victoria in the 40's began to read by progressing year by year through the eight Victorian Readers of which I have reprints. Book One began simply – I can hop. I can run, I can stop. By the end of that book (and I quote), we had mastered 'The flower has a pretty home, in quiet wood or dell, the birdie has a cosy nest and I've a home as well'.

Each year the Readers increased in difficulty, interest and scope. By the time students had reached Book 6, there were excerpts, sometimes simplified, from writers such as Dorothea Mackellar, Tolstoy, Henry Lawson, Dickens and Homer. By the end of primary school in Victoria, I think many children would have had at least a nodding exposure to some of the Western canon including some Australian writers. The Readers were used in schools until the 1950's.

Before the family left Melbourne for Sydney, my mother would give me some money and send me over the railway line to Miss Mac's Lending Library. I had to ask Miss Mac for two mysteries and one romance (for my mother) and choose one book for myself. Most of the boys' books then were of the English schoolboy variety like Billy Bunter's *Midnight Feast* and *The Air Adventures of Biggles*.

At age eleven, I discovered the William books. William, despite having the same name as myself, was everything I admired, but failed to emulate. He was inventive, daring, and an antagonist of the adult world. His exploits gave me real joy. Once I fell off a chair laughing as I read one of these wonderful books. I don't expect children of today would find the same pleasure in them. I learnt recently that Carol Ann Duffy, the UK Poet Laureate, has a similar affection for the William books and scours charity shops looking for early editions.

Many of the books I read in my teenage years were chosen by the NSW Education Department. In my first year of secondary education, one of the prescribed books was *The Wind in the Willows*. With its animal characters, Ratty, Mole and Mr Badger, it seemed then like a book for seven-year-olds. Now I regard it with affection and re-read it every decade or so. A book that can be enjoyed by both children and adults must have something going for it. A few years on, we were presented with Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*. A mystical and sad novel which I found very hard to read. Too dense and difficult for this boy in his mid - teens.

Then I began a lifetime of addiction to the detective story. Agatha Christie was at her zenith and could be relied upon to have a new book off the press every year. Once I come across an author of this genre I can be easily hooked and read all their books. I particularly enjoy crime books where the detective is of another era. Anton Gill's creation of Huy, a scribe and detective living in ancient Egypt, is an example.

Science fiction enthralled me for a while and I dived into Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, Lewis's *Out of the Silent Planet*, and Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids*. I even owned a book of science fiction poetry which has disappeared. Who did I lend it to?

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A Reading History (cont)

It's sounding as if I have avoided the classics but not so. A few I have read more than once, e.g. Crime and Punishment, Madame Bovary and David Copperfield.

The other day I retrieved The Complete Poems of Elizabeth Jennings from the bookshelf and re-read one of the most beautiful poems of the twentieth century, The Sandpiper. I also like the poems of Joyce Lee and enjoy her deep and quirky insights. Joyce, sadly no more, was a friend and fellow pharmacist. She sang in the Auburn Uniting Church choir for many years.

The Bible has been a constant presence over the years. We call it the 'Holy Bible' because in its pages is to be found wisdom, inspiration, meaning, comfort and hope. God's word in fact. Of all the options available I particularly like J.B Phillips translation of the New Testament.

What will my beneficiaries do with my books? What I do know is that the books which an individual acquires over a lifetime creates a sort of biography of the person. When given the opportunity to cast my eye over a friend's bookshelf, I may see them in a new light. And if I happen to see there a book with my name in pencil inside the cover, can I ask for it back?

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Margaret B kindly invited a number of us to assist her to celebrate her 90th birthday.



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Offerings

We're grateful for the level of support that we receive through weekly offerings, but have you thought about the amount you contribute? If it hasn't increased for a while, perhaps you might like to consider whether a small increase might be in order. Some of us use envelopes or make direct credits. Envelopes are available on the table as you enter the Church, and you can speak to any member of Council about making direct credits.

God who furnishes us with all good things to enjoy.
1 Tim 6:17

The Australian Patients Association



Stephen Mason

After 12 years as CEO of the Australian Patients Association I have recently stepped down. The job was richly rewarding. I have been asked what the APA does?

The Australian Patients Association (APA) is an independent not-for-profit organisation dedicated to championing and protecting the rights and interests of patients, improving the patient experience and their health outcomes. Our main roles are providing patient advocacy, information and support.

Its mission is to improve patient outcomes and the well-being of patients, carers and their families by passionate advocacy, education and by listening to the patients' voice.

Its Vision is to deliver a higher quality, more affordable and readily accessible healthcare system that meets every individual's health and social care needs.

APA does not receive monetary support from the government and is not associated with any governing or regulatory bodies. This means that APA is wholly independent and free to champion the need for better standards of healthcare.

APA aims to ensure access to healthcare is equitable for all patients. its work includes advocating for a healthcare system that does not have excessive fees and charges attached; educating patients about their rights and choices; and providing comfort and support to patients, carers and their families in times of need.

APA is not connected or associated to any one particular health need or healthcare service. Its genesis stems from the experience of one person trying to find answers to his dissatisfaction across a range of services and service providers. APA advocates for a Patient-centred healthcare system that ensures equitable and timely access to quality healthcare and calls for attention to systemic barriers that prevent it. APA researches and develops sensible remedies to benefit members and the broader community. These remedies are promoted through appropriate channels.

APA makes submissions to organisation, peak bodies, commissions, policy makers and government on topics that effect Australian patients.

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Website

Don't forget to keep an eye on our website. It's at <https://armadale.ucavictas.org.au/>

We try and keep it up-to-date, but we always welcome any feedback (you can send this to Graeme). We would also welcome any items of interest that you think might be suitable to be posted.

Governed by an experienced and passionate Board and supported by a small secretariat and many volunteers, APA believes that an effective, independent support group working with and for patients can be proactive and influence and effect positive change to health policy and patient care.

APA advocates for patients by guiding them through the healthcare system, educating them by providing information about patient rights to make informed decisions about their health care. We run campaigns and issue press releases from time to time to educate people and bring about changes in the healthcare industry for the overall well-being of patients.

The organisation is a one stop for all Patient information. It has resources, information and tools for you to navigate through the healthcare system whether it is elective surgery, medical diagnosis, conditions and treatment, choosing the right private health fund or knowing about the importance of having a 'Will'.

The APA provides help and assistance to the patients in need through its helpline, referral service and patient support services.

For more information visit the website <https://www.patients.org.au/>

April Blackwell leads a Christian Meditation group at the church on Tuesday evenings at 7.30pm.

Sessions usually conclude about 9 p.m. For further information contact April @ 0419 807 892

WEDNESDAY REFLECTION

We meet together for Quiet Reflection each Wednesday morning at 10 am in the Church, and then have coffee at a local cafe. However, we'll probably take a break during January. You'd be most welcome to join us.

Armadale Uniting Church

86A Kooyong Road
ARMADALE Vic 3143

Minister: Vacant
Organist: Rowan Kidd
ucarmadale@gmail.com

<https://armadale.ucavictas.org.au/>

Regular service times: 9.30 am each Sunday, Holy Communion on the 1st Sunday of the month.

Quiet Contemplation: 10 am each Wednesday (except January).

Children's program: 1st Sunday of the month, during term time.

Usually on the 5th Sunday (where a month has 5 Sundays) we hold a combined service with other Uniting Churches in Stonnington, which are not always at Armadale. If the service is not at Armadale, no service at Armadale on that day. During January, the format of our services may vary.