

Readings: Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

Loving God open the Bible to us in a fresh and exciting way,
in Jesus name we ask it.
Amen

Two weeks ago we enjoyed the preschool and good news club nativity play. They have become world famous in Riccarton and gone on the road. When I say "gone on the road," I mean they went round to St Alissa rest home and did it all again to a packed audience.

The play as you might remember was built around the Holy Family trying to find room. One Vicar I was reading about was asked to produce a Christmas pageant. After much thought and tact she gave out the various parts for the pageant. One problem was Ralph. He was a big boy for nine years old. Besides being big he was clumsy, slow moving and slow thinking. But he was well-liked by all the children, especially the younger ones. He acted as their natural protector. Ralph wanted to be a shepherd with a flute. The vicar told Ralph he had a more important role for him. As the innkeeper, I reasoned, he would not have too many lines to remember. His size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph more impressive. We practised and practised, each child feeling their importance to the success of the evening. The auditorium filled with family and friends for the yearly school extravaganza with a stage filled with exuberant children. But no one in the audience or on the stage was more caught up in the magic of that night than Ralph.

The play progressed without any major mishaps until Joseph appeared walking slowly, tenderly helping Mary to the door of the inn. He knocked hard on the wooden door. Ralph was ready and waiting.

"What do you want?" he cried out pushing the door open with a rude gesture.

"We are looking for lodgings."

"Look for them elsewhere." Ralph looked straight ahead but he spoke with

conviction. "The inn is full."

"Kind sir, we have asked everywhere in vain. We have travelled far and are very weary."

"There is no room for you."

"Please good innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary. She is heavy with child and must find a place to rest for the night. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired."

Ralph looked down at Mary. There was a long pause. The audience became tense with embarrassment.

"No, begone!" I coached.

Ralph just stood there.

Three times I prompted him from the wings, each time louder than the last. The angels backstage with me were becoming anxious too. At last, Ralph automatically repeated the words he had learned in those long weeks of practice:

"No, begone!"

Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary and started to turn away. The innkeeper did not return to his inn as directed. He stood there watching the forlorn couple, looking perplexed, with his mouth opened, his brow creased with concern, his eyes filled with tears. Then suddenly, this Christmas pageant became different from all the rest.

"Don't go, Joseph. Please don't go," Ralph called out. "Bring Mary back." His face brightened with a big smile. He stretched out his arms. "There is room for us all. Have my room!"

Hidden in our biblical texts today is this most remarkable statement. There is room for us all. Listen again to piece from our epistle reading. (Epistle just means letter.) But this time I read to you from the Message version.

Vs 8 "Jesus staying true to God's purposes has reached out not just to Jewish insiders but to non-Jewish outsiders too."

John the baptiser bursting onto the pages of Scripture picks up this theme too.

“Do not presume,” he said to the gathered crowd, “to say you have Abraham for your ancestor. God can raise up ancestors from these stones.”

In other words there is room for us all in the stable of God’s love. Room for us who are so far away, room for us who live so long after the event, room for us who aren’t Jews.

John the baptiser knew what it was to be an outsider better than most. He lived rough in the desert. His dress, his diet labelled him as an outsider on the fringes of society. Who better then to proclaim that this Jesus who is to come will make room for us all?

Each year we get ready for the nativity play at St Luke’s. This year unbeknownst to me, I had asked a baby to be Jesus and so had Sue Chappell.

“Don’t worry I said we can have two. When one gets tired the other can step in.” This was to avoid the awkward conversation of telling the parents that there wasn’t room in the stable for their child. Or a new heresy that Mary actually had twins!

So who is to be left out of the stable, the stable of God’s love. If you want a stable relationship, marry a horse they say. Surely some must be pushed out, surely there can’t be room for everyone.

Colin Gibson, a talented Dunedin composer, wrote a carol entitled Open, Open, Open the stable door. Verse 2, What crowd of folk come to see the baby, one of them is drunk and the other crazy, vs 3 fallen off the back of a skip just lately feeling rather bruised and shook up greatly, vs 4 can’t afford a coat and the kids are crying haven’t found a friend yet but I’m still trying. Then the refrain,

open, open open the stable door, welcome welcome welcome the babies born
enter enter join in the celebration, fear not here is room for us all.

The ancient tradition of the church has always been that all find room in the stable that night. Look closely and you will see that the three Sages from the East are different colours. The point is there is room for all, whatever and wherever they come from.

This was hard-fought battle in the early church. There were those that believed that only Jews were welcomed into God's salvation. And there were those, most notably Paul the writer of Romans, who believed that all people Jew and Gentile were welcomed into God's salvation.

What finally tipped the balance was looking back onto the life of Jesus. He drew no distinction between poor and rich, local and foreigner, male and female, young and old. If anything he pushed it the other way favouring the outsider and the foreigner against those who had a sense of entitlement.

The message is simple. Jesus love is so great there is room enough for you and me. Fear not, there is room for us all, there is room for us all in the Christmas stable.