

The nativity scene.

We are blessed, here at St Ives Uniting Church, to have a large building, and to go with our large building, we have a large nativity scene. The figures capture the two accounts we have of Jesus' birth – with the shepherds from gospel of Luke, and the magi – the wise men – from the gospel of Matthew. The figures were made many years ago, and have now served us through many Christmases.

For many years, though, I led Christmas services down the road at Pymble Chapel – a small, stone church, built in 1879. Christmas services at the Chapel were always special, and fittingly, just as we have a large nativity scene here, Pymble Chapel had a small one. The small nativity scene we had there was on loan to the Chapel from Guy and Ginny Smith – two of the long term and dedicated members there

The Chapel was closed in February 2022, but has now been sold to the Egyptian Coptic Church, and now, as the Church of St Mary, Christmas is celebrated there again.

When the Chapel closed, the nativity scene was returned to Guy and Ginny. We lost Guy last year, and Ginny is no longer able to be with us at church. Earlier this year, Guy and Ginny's family gave me the nativity scene, with the hope that it may be used again.

I remember the first time I set it up – under Guy's supervision – on the small table at the front of the chapel. The camel, the donkey, the shepherds, the angel, the magi, and, of course the holy family of Jesus, Mary and Where was Joseph?

It's fair to say that we don't know a lot about Joseph. Beyond the nativity stories, and the flight to Egypt, he only appears in the account of Jesus staying at the temple in at the end of Luke's second chapter.

We know Joseph was a carpenter, that he was faithful to the law, and of the house of David. But he is someone who often blends into the background of the Christmas story, who might get to lead the donkey Mary rides into Bethlehem on, and someone who is often confused with the shepherds in nativity plays.

Sure enough, that's what I'd done - I'd mistaken Joseph for a shepherd. So, I moved him from off to the side into the centre of the scene.

Joseph is important. He is important in the nativity story, and he is an important role model for us. Matthew tells us that Joseph was faithful to the law – often translated as 'a righteous man'. He knew and loved God.

And yet, so often we forget him, we think about the baby Jesus, Mary, the shepherds, the angels and the magi – but hardly ever Joseph. Think about Christmas carols we sing every year – how many of them even mention Joseph? (He did rate a mention in the last one we sang, Mary's Boy Child, though).

Joseph seems forgettable... insignificant compared to everyone else involved. But I think in itself in the context of the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph were from Nazareth – an insignificant place. And they travelled to Bethlehem – we might sing about 'Royal

David's City'... but it was not a city at the time – 'O Little Town...' is much more apt description. It was a sleepy, backwater town, in one of the less significant Roman provinces.

And those shepherds watching their flocks... while sheep were a major part of the agricultural economy of ancient Judea, the shepherds were not highly regarded. You didn't need an education to be a shepherd – a little on-the-job training would be enough. You didn't even need to read and write.

We might sing about three kings... but they weren't kings, they were magi or wise men or astrologers from a far off land.

And even Mary... in our fifth reading today, we heard of her surprise when the angel Gabrielle announced that God had chosen her.

In the nativity scene, whether it's large or small, we have the image of Jesus the Christ child lying in swaddling cloths in a manger in a stable in Bethlehem. It's not the image you would expect of a world-changing event, is it?

And yet, it is.

So often, this image too gets lost amidst a those of wintry streets, festive family meals and Santa Claus, and the ideas of "The spirit of Christmas" and the "Real Meaning of Christmas" or whatever.

A favourite bible verse for Christmas is from Luke chapter 2, which we've heard this morning, with the angels declaring, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests." (Luke 2:14)

But it's not just a verse for Christmas. God did give us his son when he was born to Mary in Bethlehem, but the story didn't end there. That child grew and many years later, he began teaching that the kingdom of God was at hand, he showed that the kingdom of God was at hand not only in his words but in his actions – he healed, he reached out to the poor, the outcast and the foreigner, he fed the hungry, he calmed storms, he cast out demons, he raised the dead.

Ultimately, of course, he was betrayed and tried and crucified. But in his death and resurrection, he opened the way to true and lasting peace. Everlasting life, for all who turn to him in faith.

The nativity scene is one of humility and insignificance. But it's something we can relate to – who hasn't felt insignificant amongst the goings on of the world and our lives? Who hasn't felt that they blended into the background like Joseph? Who hasn't felt out of place? Who hasn't longed for peace?

In the midst of all the turbulence of the world, let's look again to the Christ Child – but not just the helpless Christ Child lying in a manger in Bethlehem, but also the Christ Child who was prophesied, the Christ Child who was conceived of Holy Spirit and the

virgin Mary, the Christ Child who is the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy, the Christ Child who is the Messiah, who is the saviour – who is our saviour.

So, in these last days of advent, as Christmas approaches, in amongst all the hustle and bustle of the world and our lives, let us focus on the Christ Child, on Jesus.

Amen