

**Christmas in Ngaruawahia
Christmas Eve**

**Luke 2:1-14
24 December 2009**

Hohepa sighed deeply as he changed gear on his cherished but somewhat tired Mazda 626. It was raining steadily as he drove through Huntly then south along the highway that followed every bend of the Waikato River. Every bump in the road could be clearly felt, but Hohepa was especially concerned about the welfare of his passenger, his wife Mere. Mere was pregnant, very pregnant.

He knew the child was not his, because there had been no intimacy between them when he had first learned of her condition. At first he was angry. He felt betrayed, and as much as he loved Mere and was reluctant to see her have to go on the DPB, he decided to finish with her. Before he could do so though, he had a dream in which he learned the child was special. It was a boy, and He had not been conceived with another man but by the Holy Spirit. He would set his people free and He should be named Ihu. When Hohepa awoke, he arranged to marry Mere as soon as possible, before anybody else found out she was pregnant.

Hohepa and Mere were driving to Ngaruawahia for a WINZ appointment the following day, for that was the town where Hohepa was registered. He didn't really want to have to go to WINZ for help, but he knew he had little choice. Up until recently, Hohepa had had series of good jobs on building sites, where his carpentry skills had been in great demand, but with the recession, offers of building work had all but dried up.

As they drove across the great bridge over the Waikato River on the northern side of town, he thought how ironic it was that as a direct descendant of Potatu Te Wherowhero, the first Maori King, this was his ancestral home, but to his WINZ case worker, he would be just another unemployed young Maori. If only she knew. Hohepa had encountered prejudice all his life, but he knew that developing resentment was not going to help. He had his family to think about.

It was getting dark when they arrived, and the rain was becoming more and more persistent. The first thing they needed was somewhere to stay. The one hotel in town was full, as were the two motels. That only left a holiday camp about a mile out of town. Hohepa knew that they were running out of options. He tried his luck, only to find that the camp had been completely booked out by a youth group.

In desperation, Hohepa begged to be able to stay. The caretaker reluctantly said no. Hohepa asked Mere to get out of the car. When the caretaker saw her, heavily pregnant, with the rain glistening in her hair, he felt moved to help them. There were no spare rooms, but he could let them sleep in a spare stall in some stables. He apologised that this was all he could do, but Hohepa and Mere gratefully accepted his offer.

Hohepa helped Mere through the boggy mud into the stables and returned to the car to fetch blankets and towels. It was not exactly cold, but they were quite wet. The stable was dry, if a little draughty, which was a blessing in some ways, as it helped disperse the pervading odour of horse manure. They were so tired though that once they had dried themselves they thought they would be able to sleep easily on their makeshift bed of blankets and hay. This was not to be. Whether it was because of the stress of finding somewhere to stay for the night or because the time had come, around midnight, Mere had her baby, a boy whom they named Ihu, the name that had been given to Hohepa in his dream.

While the story of Hohepa, Mere and baby Ihu may be fictional, the birth of Jesus may have happened in exactly this manner if He had been born in New Zealand in 2009 instead of in Judea 2000 years earlier.

Jesus was no ordinary child. He was both divine and human. He was both almighty God and a vulnerable little baby. So why did a child who was the very incarnation of God be born, live and die in such humble circumstances? It was because through Him, all peoples could be reconciled with God, but for this to happen, God had to become fully human, and this meant experiencing the joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain and high hopes and broken dreams that are part of human life.

Jesus was born in the lowliest of circumstances, worked as a humble carpenter, befriended sinners and outcasts and his humility became humiliation when He died the most dreadful death imaginable, a death over which He ultimately triumphed with his resurrection. So even though tonight we are celebrating the Christ child being born, we can not ignore the shadow of the Cross hanging over the manger.

You will often hear me say my definition of Christian ministry is revealing Christ in word and action. Well, there is a flip side to that. Not only should people see Christ in us, we should see Christ in

them. Jesus once said that when we give food to the hungry, refresh the thirsty, welcome strangers, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit prisoners, we do this for Him.

Remember the recent controversy over the Christmas billboard at St. Matthew's in the City Church in Auckland. While it did get people thinking about Jesus, it was hardly in good taste. Many would say it was blasphemous. Regardless of how we describe it though, many of God's children will spend Christmas with inadequate food, shelter and essentials. To me, that is more blasphemous than any billboard.

There are people like Hohepa, Mere and baby Ihu throughout the land. There are the downtrodden, the oppressed and broken hearted, just like there were in Jesus' day. If we show love and compassion to them, we are showing love and compassion to Christ, and if we see Christ in them, then they might also see Christ in us.

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