

**A sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran on Christmass Morning in Christ Church Cathedral Newcastle 2010.
Text: Luke 2: 8-20 'you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'**

Christmass is the astonishing evidence of God's commitment to humankind. Christmas is the Christian festival that celebrates commitment.

And we imitate this momentous act of God's commitment in our social practice of giving Christmas gifts. We give gifts to those to whom we are committed either through familial loyalty and affection or through the affection of friendship. Our gifts, carefully chosen, are tangible expressions of our commitment to those whom we hold dear.

The birth of a baby, if not itself a sign of mutual loving commitment, will naturally generate such commitment. One of the significant cultural changes in contemporary society is that for some couples the baptism of their baby is the first publicly acknowledged and celebrated occasion of their being a couple. This recognition is what weddings used to declare.

However, with the increase of de facto relationships the baptism of the first baby has become for some couples the first formal occasion that they proclaim publicly that they are a couple, indissolubly linked now through the birth of their child. Baptism can also be the first significant occasion on which a couple look to the future and think seriously about what it means to have a child including how their relationship as a couple might change.

Commitment is drawn out of us by others whom we regard as significant to us. This is most emotionally so when we fall in love or we have a child or we recognize another as a very dear friend. Our natural human response is to be committed. The ideal commitment is celebrated as an open-ended commitment. The commitment is not circumscribed by limits that might secure us against the needs of the other.

This type of commitment is the ideal and it tantalizes us. It might be elusive for some of us, but it has attractional power. We hope for such commitment because when we are really reflective we know that we need others in order to be fulfilled as a person. And the significant others can only enter our lives through commitment.

Our present culture is an astonishing pastiche of both longing for commitment and avoiding commitment and even living with limited commitment. A social phenomenon that does cause distress and whose longer-term outcomes are yet to be revealed and evaluated is the phenomenon of young men avoiding permanent commitment in marriage.

There are couples who have been in lengthy relationships that abruptly end when the prospect of marriage is raised. There are instances of young women in their early thirties facing the ending of long-term relationships and having to face the prospect of beginning again. This is painful and a battering of their self-esteem.

The embrace of limited commitment is not just evidenced in such social relationships. This is a wider social phenomenon that affects the viability of social enterprises within the community like service clubs and volunteer organizations.

It is possible that making limited commitments infects political parties who offer few if any policies to be publicly debated. Internationally, the plight of the roaming homeless displaced by violent destabilizing conflict is worsened by the limited commitments that affluent nations make in offering settlement to refugees.

I understand that Christians in Iraq are facing persecution from the democratically elected Iraqi government and are being forced out of Iraq. There are at least a million refugees who have fled to the northern parts of Syria and who are under the care of the United Nations. Perversely, Saddam Hussein had treated the Christians well because in their liturgies they had prayed for the Head of State, as we do especially at Evening Prayer.

The Sydney Morning Herald reported this week on the plight of Christians in Baghdad

Only one church in the Iraqi capital is celebrating Christmas fully this year. Christians fear a recurrence of the recent murders of fellow parishioners and are forced to mark the occasion in the absence of more than 1000 families who have fled.

Amnesty International has warned of a rise in violence in the run-up to Christmas and has urged the [Iraqi] government to do more to protect Christians, who are believed to number less than 500,000, about half the tally of seven years ago.¹

The practice of limited commitment is I think a supple form of social Darwinism that will eventually lead to the survival of only the socially strongest. This will be culturally dehumanizing.

The twentieth century is blotted with dreadful examples of such social dehumanization. We should be examining the potential consequences of self-interested limited commitment and its social costs, especially the erosion of social capital.

Contrary to the social phenomenon of limited commitment in relationships - personal, communitarian and even international- there is the staunch theological declaration of this festival of Christmas that God is fully committed to humankind. The evidence for this is the guidance given to the shepherds

you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

The Christmas declaration is that in the vulnerability of a newly-born baby God seals God's commitment to us without any form of self-protective security. There was no Divine Teflon shield around Jesus either in his birth or throughout his life.

God is fully exposed to humankind in this baby. Indeed, through the adult life of Jesus this exposure and vulnerability is maintained and deepened. Jesus lived without bodyguards or security agents clearing a smooth path for him.

In Jesus God experiences life as humankind experiences it, and finally in an act of sacrifice emphatically seals an eternal commitment to humankind. This is the commitment that is known in the Bible as the 'new covenant'.

At its simplest and starkest it is God's self-declaration that God is committed to us through death and beyond death. A classic hymn by George Mattheson published in 1882 puts this declaration in these memorable words

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

¹ The Sydney Morning Herald. Thursday, December 23rd 2010, p.

There is mutuality in commitment. Someone's commitment to me has to be accepted by me and that acceptance is itself an early form of commitment. Commitment is a reciprocal phenomenon.

This festival of Christmas invites us to welcome God's commitment to us evidenced concretely in the birth of this baby who becomes recognized as Son of God. This commitment is on our level, within our life experiences, recognizable by us because we know what being human is like.

Our awareness of our needs, of our longing for meaning and purpose, for making sense of all that swirls around us, all these alert us to our basic desire to know that God is committed to us. The prospect of a universal indifference to us daunts us, even taunts us because at heart we thrive in commitment.

The commitment of God is assured. We know this theologically as 'the new covenant', God making clear to us God's relationship with us – God's self-giving, self-expending on our behalf no matter the cost to God.

And the sign of this commitment - 'you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'

God's commitment to us is total, now and for ever.