

Knox Uniting Church Cluster.

**Sunday December 21st, 2025 – (RCL: Year A. Advent 4.) Fourth Sunday of Advent
Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Rowville Uniting Service**

Bible passages: Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 and Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSVUE)

“Only love can save us”

The romantic comedy movie, ‘Love Actually’ made back in 2003, always gets screened again on our TVs around this time of the year, as we approach Christmas. It’s a sentimental favourite Christmas movie. At the start of the movie the voice of Hugh Grant comes over saying, “Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport. General opinion's starting to make out that we live in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere... fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends...If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling you'll find that love actually is all around”

Then as the story unfolds we see the way that love drives people to do unexpected and sometimes astonishing things. Take Billy Mack for example, the old, crass, worn-out rock singer – who somehow manages to record a Christmas song that goes to the top of the charts. As a result, he gets invited to a celebration party with Elton John. But, surprise, surprise, he turns that down to spend a quiet evening with his trusty manager, Joe – because that’s the real person he loves, so for him that was the right thing to do.

Love has the power to make people do the extraordinary.

In our gospel reading today from Matthew 1, Joseph acts in an extraordinary way because of love. When he hears that Mary is pregnant, he could only assume someone else was the father. Imagine his feelings! Lots of emotions – including anger, for sure. The expected outcome would be that he announces what’s happened, and young Mary would be tried publicly, and possibly stoned to death. But because of love for God and love for Mary, he does the extraordinary and decides to keep it all quiet, to stay with Mary and take her to be his wife and her child as his own. Yes, this decision was prompted by a visit from an angel in a dream, but it was his decision to respond in the way he did. To respond in love, not anger. A love that God planted in his heart.

God, being the source of love, also does the extraordinary because of love.

In our Psalm today, the people expect God to be angry and judgemental because of people’s sins. They wonder whether God will react with harsh punishment or with grace and mercy. The psalm is thus a cry-out to God pleading for his love. Three times in the psalm comes the refrain: *“Turn us again to yourself O God. Look down on us in joy and love. Only then shall we be saved!”* (v 3,7,19 Living Bible translation). In other words, “Only your love can save us”

Hundreds of years after those words were written, the angel promised Joseph that his son would indeed ‘save people from their sins’ (v21). How would he do that? With love.

The angel's message includes a quote from Isaiah 7:14 which prophecies that this baby will be 'Immanuel – God with us' (v23). That's the greatest, and most astonishing act of love the world has ever seen. Because of God's intense, loving desire to show his love to us, he became one of us, right into the thick of our human existence. That's exactly what that baby did when he grew up. And the very last words of Matthew's gospel contain the same promise as that of the angel at the start of Matthew: "I will be with you always, to the very end of the age" (28:20). Immanuel – God with us. Always. Because of love.

The way Joseph responds to these promises is to respond in love. And his response becomes a model for us – to respond in love, because that's the only response that truly saves us and others around us. We might say, "Well it was easy for Joseph – he had an angel tell him these things". That should not be our excuse. We have the inner promptings of God's Spirit always guiding us to a response of love. Sometimes that response will go against the trend and be a big surprise, but that's typical of a love-response.

We've all been thinking a lot this week about the Bondi massacre last Sunday. How do we respond to that? What do we sense God prompting us to say, or do, or think about this horrible event? We very likely feel anger towards the perpetrators, or a group of people or the government – whoever. I certainly do. It's actually okay to feel anger. But to respond in anger is almost always destructive, it almost always just adds to the problem, and goes against what God is urging us to do through his spirit – to respond in love, as hard and astonishing as that might be - because only love will save us.

The question I've personally been wrestling with since Bondi's attack is this: What would it look like for me to respond in love to that event? Or to any horrible event for that matter?

I know that for myself, whenever I feel angry about something, or some animosity towards another person, maybe because of some injustice done, my feelings urge me to say something or do something nasty – to put someone down, to get my own back in some way. No doubt Joseph felt like he needed to do something like that because of his hurt and pain. For me it is always a real challenge to choose the radical response of love. I'm sure you all feel the same challenge. But that's our only true course of action. That response must be our hope and our prayer today, because only love will save us.