

St James' Church, Weybridge

Sermon Notes for Christmas Day, 25 December 2023

Today's Readings

First Reading Isaiah 52:7-10

Isaiah encourages the Jews with good news of God's future victory and salvation. He will defeat their Babylonian oppressors, restore the ruined Jerusalem and bring his people back home from exile.

Gospel John 1:1-14

The writer of the fourth Gospel sets out the main themes of his book in this prologue and introduces Jesus as the Word made flesh, the one who reveals to us what God is like and shines light into the dark places of the world and our lives.

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" John 1:14

Why did nobody bid for Donner and Blitzen on eBay? They were two deer!

Despite the best efforts of the marketing and communications experts, with more Christmas Adverts this year than ever before, some people simply don't like the holiday festivities. Bar hum bug you may say! I on the other hand love them. Our former curate Louise once described me as Mr Christmas!

For church communities like St James', good communication is an important part of our outreach as we seek to connect with people and share the Gospel, in our post-modern western context. How and what we communicate matter – and get that wrong and we can be in all sorts of trouble.

From print media to on-line – the internet has opened up all sorts of mediums for communication! We can now get our message out there loud and clear for anyone who wants to hear. You may even be here today because you have seen one of our advertisements; or because of 'word of mouth!' An essential part of communication are the words we use – less is more some say. So, we should not be surprised to read in today's Gospel according to John – his prologue, that Jesus is referred to as "the Word".

This passage by John is all about communicating God's creative action in the world and sharing the message that Jesus is born among us – God dwells with us.

At the time John wrote his account of the life, ministry, teaching, death and resurrection of Jesus this description of our Lord as 'Word' was an expression familiar to both Jews and Greeks. To call Jesus "the Word" is a way of saying he reveals to us what God is like and that's quite a revelation, that God chose to come among us in human form and reveal his love for us and values in action. And John tells us more in his 'Prologue' to the Gospel, to help us understand that Jesus reveals God to us in a number of ways; He is with God from the very beginning – in creation and with the Spirit too.

He didn't simply come into being at a set point in time like the rest of us but has always existed and been in the closest of relationships with God. Indeed, the passage states that it was through Jesus that God created the world. Even more significantly, he can show us what God is like because he shares God's divine nature.

As verse one reminds us, “the Word was God”. The passage also goes on to say that Christ is a light in the world, enlightening us about God. Luke in his Gospel uses the word ‘Emmanuel’ to describe this relationship of God with us.

And then we have today’s great festal celebrations: Turkeys and trimmings, festive lights, trees, and garlands. Families gathering, the Kings speech, perhaps a game of monopoly or charades and so much more to delight and entertain and in a few hours’ time it will all be over!

It is wonderful that we light up our homes at this time of year as we celebrate God’s true light coming into the world because the metaphor in today’s Gospel of light overcoming darkness, which mirrors the opening verses of Genesis chapter 1, is at the heart of what God is about in Jesus, shining a light into our very lives today that we may choose to walk his path of love. For John also says that Jesus is one with God, but that he gave up his place in heaven to live among us as a real human being and show us what God is like in the flesh. Born in a stable, or even perhaps a cave at the back of an inn, where oxen feed on hay – the poorest of starts. In the Greek it says, “He pitched his tent among us.”

The divine Son of God came and dwelt with us and, as we know Jesus was spared none of the pain of human existence. He suffered, he was rejected or as John describes it, the world knew him not. Verses 10 to 11 hint at some of the sadness he endured: he who had brought all things into existence was not welcomed to the earth he had made; he was rejected.

Even the nation prepared by God to expect the Messiah through centuries of prophetic utterances did not recognise him as the chosen one.

Friends in faith, on this Christmas morning as we celebrate the birth of Jesus, as we light the lights and sing our carols, do we truly recognise who Jesus is? It is tempting to miss the point of the Christmas story and see Jesus simply as a lovely, meek and mild baby born a long time ago in a faraway land.

Yet the real Christmas story is far more dramatic than that and Christmas should remind us that the Son of God dwelt among us, not only sharing our human nature but also our pain. That is what the word ‘Emmanuel’ means, Jesus is born among us – God is with us! And the creator of all things longs to be in communication with each one of us – now, today, for ever!

While Christmas may be presented as a time of glitter and sparkle, its true meaning is revealed in the nitty-gritty of life as John’s prologue suggests.

When we are struggling and wondering where God is and why he has allowed suffering into our lives, we can take comfort from the knowledge that, through Jesus, God has suffered with us and knows exactly what we are going through. God knows his creation inside out and therefore God knows us also and all that is important to us. In Christ we are never alone, and we are called out of the darkness into his marvellous light; for he is the promised Emmanuel: God with us. Amen.

One last funny...

Why do Christmas Trees always look to the past? Because the present is below them!!!

Father Damian Harrison-Miles, December 2023.