



A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell

Thursday, December 24, 2020

The Eve of Christmas

Scripture Passages: Isaiah 9: 2-7, Titus 2:11-14 & Luke 2:1-20

+ In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I have a small ritual that I indulge in each year. I love words and I am always interested in the word of the year. It's almost always a commentary on our culture.

Well, this year, this year – 2020 – not surprisingly, the Oxford English Dictionary scholars who determine such things for us – are stumped. They say – and this will either make you laugh or cry – they say that they've never witnessed a year in language like the one we've just had. The Oxford team was identifying hundreds of significant new words and usages as the year unfolded, dozens of which would have been a slam dunk for Word of the Year at any other time.

"It's both unprecedented and a little ironic - in a year that left us speechless, 2020 has been filled with new words unlike any other."

Well, there we are. 2020 has defeated the mighty OED. What I can tell you is that the Use of the word "Pandemic" is up 57,000% No joke. That is an actual statistic.

Well, what are we then to do with a year like this? Are we to throw our hands up like the OED and declare defeat? What are we to do with a celebration of the feast of the nativity of our Lord in a time like this? In one sense – everything seems to have changed – not least, we're sitting in front of a computer screen for our service tonight because we have sacrificed our traditions of public worship for public safety, but in another – perhaps more global - way, nothing has changed. We, along with 3 billion people around the world are still celebrating the birth of our Lord and Saviour in this season. The centre more than holds in that sense.

But undeniably, we are hearing the account of the birth of the Christ, differently. We are hearing it in sacred simplicity. And that means that things that we usually move past quite quickly in the busyness and celebration of a “normal” Christmas are thrown into relief.

We can hear the transformation of this world’s order woven all through the story – we can hear change, and a different set of beliefs and values as opposed to those of the world’s reflected in this narrative. It’s a narrative in which every part, every person, reflects something of God’s love. Every part of this story tells us about how God is not complicit with the ways of this world. Let me walk you through it – and as Jesus says, whoever has ears, let them hear:

First, there are the angels. There are a few encounters with angels in the narrative of Jesus’ birth – in telling Mary that she is to bear a son, in warning Joseph in a dream that the Holy family were in danger, in warning the wise men from the east to avoid Herod. But the ones that we read about the incarnation are perhaps the most evocative, the most understandable, and therefore at the same time, the most human of encounters.

A messenger of God – because that’s what angels are after all – appears to hard-working men, in a hard-scrabble place – off to the side of the action, off to the side of Jesus’ actual birth in Bethlehem, and tells them – rather amazingly I’ve always thought - not to be afraid. He tells them not to be afraid, because clearly they are, in fact the scripture says they’re terrified.

And because humans do not often have encounters of this kind, because that experience was unusual, unasked for, it was at first something to be feared – to be encountered with wariness – with defensive gestures. How many paintings or Christmas cards have we seen with the shepherds shielding their eyes and leaning away from the angels as if to defend themselves from the intrusion of God into their rough hillside life? I think, even if we greet this image as something Christmas-card familiar, that we’ve recognized something in that image that rings true.

Of course the fear that the angel inspires is not as it turns out a legitimate one – but the angel brings a message that is challenging to them. The angel says, don’t be afraid. That is to say, leave aside your fear and your defensiveness or wariness. I bring good news. The birth of this child – this child born for you - will change everything. It will change how you understand everything – how you understand yourself and those around you. And these are the words that stick out to me :

To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Not, the child born to Mary and Joseph, but the child born to you. You see, Jesus did not merely happen upon the world, he was born for us. He was sent to us. The Father sent his son. That’s actually the meaning of his name: Emmanuel – which means: God with us.

The events of the birth of Christ tell us lots of things – but perhaps first and foremost the truth that God did and does go to any lengths to reach us and guide us, challenge us and love us – he even sent his own son – in the most vulnerable way possible to speak to us in our own language, and in our own ways so that there could be no mistake in understanding him.

You see, Jesus' birth is a break with the way things are. This story tells us about the breaking in of divine truth on our world. The birth of Jesus shows us the way things could be:

Think about the story as we know it: God works through the elderly and wise – Zacharias, and Elizabeth, and later in the Gospel story, Simeon and Anna – all who had been relegated by their culture to 'past their usefulness', were redeemed and used as agents and witnesses of God's great purposes – that is an important truth and one that we would do well to take into ourselves. Age is no barrier to God, age is no disqualifier of grace and truth and importance.

And then there are the poor shepherds – tradition has it they were known to contemporaries as unreliable and frankly dishonourable people – but they are the first to hear about the birth of God – showing us that we are all included in God's plan whether we consider ourselves to be worthy or not of God's love and mercy.

God comes to a woman – a girl really – whose life is turned upside down in order to receive him: a girl to whom a pregnancy outside of marriage spelled shame – and frankly danger, beyond what we can register in our more accepting times. But my goodness she was brave and strong – her 'yes' to this situation is a manifesto and something of which to be proud – talk about not being complicit with oppression and wrongdoing.

A messenger of God – another scary angel - comes to Joseph whose whole idea of his role in society, his self worth and identity – and even his role within his own marriage is redefined – showing that God can even rewrite our relationships and expand them to make room for his presence.

And God comes to magi or wise men who seek wisdom in the stars and instead find wisdom in a stable through the deepest and most committed love that exists.

God comes to a conquered land – a conquered people – like so many in our world today - in which a human – in the form of the Roman Emperor - has set himself up as God – reaching for the power of the Divine, certainly having the power over life and death. But the reality is that God has come in the form of a human reaching down into our lives in the power of love, not in domination or cruelty, in vulnerability not violence nor political repression.

God entered into the midst of our lack of peace and God shares in the experience of life.

And think about the way Jesus came into the world: he was a refugee, an outcast, a political and religious activist, he associated with prostitutes and tax collectors, he searched and served among the least and the lost, the marginalized and the persecuted.

So you can see that everyone mentioned in the story of the incarnation shows us the good news of the coming of the Messiah. The refusal to be complicit with this world and instead revealing the love of God.

And as Jesus grew and ministered among his people, he knew what it meant to enter into spaces where peace – peace of mind and heart - seems a forlorn hope: he knew it because he himself endured suffering and humiliation and the cross. And in so doing he showed himself unwilling to be complicit in how the world treats the poor and the suffering.

And that's the bit that comforts me, and challenges me all at the same time. That God is there. God is with us. Jesus is the light that overcomes the darkness of this world – even the darkness of a pandemic. Jesus was born for us to be a sign that even though the darkness threatens to overwhelm us at times, the light still shines – as a judgement, a rebuke and rebellion against the darkness of violence, prejudice and misguided fear. Jesus was born for us to be a sign of peace.

Back to the story of Jesus' birth – those angels, after delivering the good news of Jesus' birth, as they went away into heaven, offered God's peace - and goodwill to all people. Their fear forgotten, the shepherds went to verify the angel's words. And it was just as they'd been told. And the shepherds returned to their hillside life – the same but different - knowing now that God was working in this world.

Shepherds and angels. It's a funny way for a saviour to arrive. But this way of coming – so not the way the world operates is also an important part of the story.

And that is very purposeful. As one scholar has written,

“Jesus came to us in just the right spot, at just the right time and in just the right way. [The manner of his birth] is his very first sermon to us. And it is perfectly in tune with every other sermon he preached... Blessed are the poor in spirit... Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... Store up for yourself treasures in heaven...The first shall be last and the last shall be first.”

That's so true. God comes – not as we want him to. No, from the first it has been clear that God's ways are not our ways. We don't get what we want. God is far wiser than that. God comes as we need him to: in ways that are – thank God - contrary to the ways of this world. He comes to shepherds, not statesmen, and speaks through angels, not governments and works through a pregnant teenage girl, not generals or governors.

And yet, we remember little of those governments and governors – those great men – and here we are celebrating the Prince of Peace thousands of years later. God speaks through the poor, and the lonely and the aged and the sick. God walks with the disappointed, the despairing and what's more, what's crucially more, The Lord asks us who try, like the shepherds, not to be afraid, to do these things as well so that peace on earth and goodwill to all does not remain a pipe dream.

God asks us in defiance of the darkness of this world to carry the light of Christ into the world; God asks us to be better than we are, better than this world is – not to be complicit with it - for his namesake. And God is there, for that is why God sent his son – Emmanuel – which means, God with us - to show us what God's love looks and feels like.

That's what I hear in scripture this strange and difficult year: Do not be afraid; This child is born for you. God here among us; light in the midst of us. Peace and goodwill to all people.

And even though much around us is different – and hard and challenging and definitely not as we want it to be, these things do not change.

And most importantly for us to remember: Jesus was born to grant us courage and faith sufficient to the day, and we will get through this.

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.