

Monday 25th December 2017 Cathedral, Grahamstown 8.30 a.m.		CHRISTMAS DAY
Isaiah 52:7-10	Ps 98	Heb 1:1-4
		Luke 2:1-20
A CHILD IS BORN		

“And she [Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son, and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:7)

INTRODUCTION

A few days ago, our younger daughter, a medical student, announced to the dinner table that she was off to watch some babies being born – her first experience of baby catching! The conversation rapidly moved into memories of our children’s births, and my own background growing up on a sheep farm, and helping with lambing – all of which I found immensely useful when the time came for our children to be born!

1. CHRISTMAS

We are here today because a child was born. We gather with Christians all over the world, to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, at Bethlehem, over 2000 years ago. St Bernard of Clairvaux, a French monk of the 11th century, described the three “comings” of Christ, past, present and future: “In the first, he was our redemption; in the last he will appear as our life; in this middle coming – the present – he is our rest and our consolation.” Today, on the feast of Christmas, we celebrate his coming as our rest, our consolation, our Redeemer and Lord, our Saviour.

2. OUR READINGS

We heard words of wonder and promise, even magic, in our scripture readings:

“Break forth into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.” (Isa 52:9-10)

“In the last days God has spoken to us by a Son... the reflection of God’s glory, the exact imprint of God’s very being...” (Heb 1:2-3)

St Luke’s version of the birth of Jesus – the census under Emperor Augustus, Joseph goes with his fiancée Mary to Bethlehem, the city of David. Mary is expecting a child. The baby arrives – an awkward time, an awkward place, born in a stable, because the inn was full and there were no BnBs in Bethlehem at that time.

Up to that point, the story is straightforward – it is the birth of a child. But then the wonder breaks out – the angel’s message to the shepherds, the heavenly choir, the shepherds visit to find Mary and Joseph, the child lying in a manger. And the shepherds return to their work, their flock, “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen...” (Luke 2:20). It was a night to remember!

Today is a day to remember – the birth of our Saviour, our Lord, God with us. Today we are brought face to face with the greatest gift of all, the gift of God to us in His Son – “the reflection of God’s glory, the exact imprint of God’s very being...”

3. AND SO...

A newborn child represents so much – excitement, love, new beginnings, new possibilities...

Christmas Day holds all these together, brings us back to Bethlehem, the place and experience of new birth...

The birth of Jesus means that we live in a world with new possibilities, a world in which God opens new doors. God is deeply, 2

profoundly involved in the world that he made, to transform and renew and save it. God comes to us in the person of His Son Jesus Christ to invite us into new life. This baby born was a sign to the shepherds, to Mary and Joseph; Jesus is God's sign to us.

The birth we celebrate today is not just any child – this is God's child, God's son, born. And the birth of Jesus was and is God's gift to us and to the whole world to set us free – to save us.

God offers us salvation. To be saved – that's a big idea. We save someone from drowning. We are saved from death in a car accident. We are saved when someone else helps us, when there is nothing we can do about it. The scriptures speak of this: "What can save me from the power of sin?" (Rom 7:24) Only Christ can do that. "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8).

We live in a world that needs to be set free, that needs to return to Bethlehem, that needs to be saved, that needs new life and hope. We think of families broken by an alcoholic father, or a marriage shattered by unfaithfulness... we think of communities, neighbours, deeply divided by suspicion and hatred, and needing to put things together again... we think of people carrying so much pain from the past, such as the Rhodes University Reference List protesters, and all who are victims of rape or sexual abuse... we think of the church with its divisions and struggles... we need to be saved. We can't do it on our own. We are like someone stuck in mud: we are unable to move and set ourselves free.

And yet we also live in a world with signs of hope... the peaceful transition of power in Zimbabwe... the appointment of Bishop Sarah Mullaly as the next Bishop of London and the third most senior bishop in the Church of England; the appointment of our own Revd Claire as Cathedral Chancellor – the first such appointment of a woman, in our Province - with all that these appointments say about the ministry of women... the election last weekend of a new leadership for the ANC....

Of that election, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba said:

“As people of faith, our hope is always in God and not in any political party or leader. But we do need leaders of integrity who will put the common good above all else.

I look forward to critical engagement with the new leaders of the ANC. The country is looking to them to work for the common good, to promote equality of opportunity and to uphold the highest ethical standards.

The new leaders and their supporters can count on the support of the faith community – but only if they work together to re-establish values-based, ethical and moral leadership.”

And yesterday evening, at the Midnight Mass in Cape Town, St George’s Cathedral, the Archbishop called for President Zuma to be recalled.

The birth of Jesus is a sign and a promise that, when we are stuck in the mud, when we are trapped in our sin, when we realise that we are unable to save ourselves, that there is always a new beginning. We may face failure, disappointment, rejection...these become our Bethlehem, our place of new birth, as we take these matters to God and look to him to open new doors and show us a way forward.

The birth of Jesus says that the answer is not always what we expect. I am struck by the human story of Mary and Joseph – she pregnant but not by Joseph; on the road to Bethlehem with hundreds of others on the orders of the emperor; no place to stay that night; a birth in a stable...but in that birth was the miracle of the Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord, angels singing, praising God and proclaiming peace on earth. God comes in Jesus to play the wild card, to pour manna from heaven, to produce flowers in the wilderness, to show us the Karoo beetles...The birth of Jesus means that we can expect the unexpected...

The birth of Jesus says that we live in a world where God is active: where because of the life of Christ in us, we become God's instruments to heal and renew and save and make whole.

The birth of Jesus Christ into our world says that God is with us. We are not drifting aimlessly through an empty cosmos, a harsh and alien world. We are part of a world that is loved by God, with all its brokenness and loneliness. God holds the world – you and me – in the palm of His hands. Julian of Norwich was a 14th century English mystic, who saw in a hazelnut a symbol of all that God has made, and was given these words: “This hazelnut lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.”

For Julian, and for us, we are like that hazelnut. God made us. God loves us. God keeps us. All things have their beginning, their life, by the love of God.

And our response, on this Christmas Day? May it be the response of open hearts – to receive God's love; may we respond with open hands – to give and share God's love; may we respond with open minds – to engage with God's will; may we respond with open lives – to shine with Christ's love; to be reconcilers, peacemakers; to stand for what is right; to be faithful in our marriages and relationships; to be humble in our leadership.

Jesus Christ comes to us in our every-day lives, whether ordinary or exciting – into our joys and our desolation – as our rest and our consolation.

CONCLUSION

A poem by Howard Thurman – The Mood of Christmas – see attached.

Let us be open to receive the love and grace of God, poured into our hearts and lives in Jesus Christ. May we be people of light and hope in the year to come.

May the Lord bless us as the Cathedral community this Christmas, and
in all that lies ahead.

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