

<b>Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> December 2018</b> <b>Cathedral, Grahamstown</b> <b>8.30 a.m.</b>		<b>CHRISTMAS DAY</b>	
Isaiah 52:7-10	Ps 98	Heb 1:1-4	
		Luke 2:1-20	
<b>GOD WITH US</b>			

“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)

**CHRISTMAS**

As the annual Rotary Carols by Candlelight service ended, a few weeks ago, I said to someone, “It was both utterly predictable and utterly delightful!” We gather for the Christmas celebrations knowing exactly what is to happen, who the main actors are, and the details of the story. Each year, without fail, there is a star, there are shepherds with a variety of animals (certainly here in Grahamstown we expect cows and donkeys); there are wise men (and women) – some of them remarkably young; there are countless angels; and, of course, as the annual stars of the show, Mary, Joseph, and THE BABY!!! The familiar words are read from the Bible. The well-known Christmas carols and hymns are sung. Parents watch anxiously as children wave lighted candles around, dripping wax on the pews and threatening to set alight the hair of people in the next row. But we all make it to the end, the star processes down the Cathedral aisle to the Christmas tree; the lights blaze out, we sing “Joy to the world” with a fair amount of both jubilation and relief that all went smoothly. Jesus Christ is born!

Our scripture readings take us into the heart of Christmas.

## THE SCRIPTURES

“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation” (**Isaiah 52:7**). Today is a day of peace and good news. An antidote and contrast, a new narrative, to counter the usual narratives of hatred and violence and fear.

The baby Jesus born today “is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (**Hebrews 1:3**). Jesus Christ is not the product of colonialism or conquest. Jesus is not owned by any one nation or tribe. He is not black or white, or from East or West, North or South. Christ is the universal saviour for all people, the source of life and hope for us all.

Luke’s Gospel (**Luke 2:1-20**) gives us the well-known story of shepherds and angels. But St Luke not only places the baby in a manger. He locates the birth of Jesus in an historical and political context: the time of Emperor Caesar Augustus, while Quirinius was governor of Syria, the census or registration that brought people from all over the Roman world back to their towns of origin. With the birth of Jesus Christ, God enters human history in a quite unique way. God reveals himself, however, not through the rulers or the powers of the age, not through the great military or political figures, but in the birth of a child.

Jesus is born in a small village; in a stable. His first bed is a manger. Mary and Joseph are among hundreds of people who are forced to travel at that time for the census. The picture is one not of power or privilege, but of powerlessness; not of importance or political significance, but of unimportance. It is the shepherds, not the emperor or the governor, who come to worship. We have to listen to the angels, not the politicians or rulers of this world, to discover truth and wonder. It is in this birth and in this baby, this child, that God comes to us and invites us to discover life, hope, a new way to live.

The story unfolds. The baby is born. Angels send shepherds to worship. There are signs of mystery and wonder, glory and light and majesty, heavenly voices:

“to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord.”

But the signs for the shepherds are also ordinary signs of new birth: a baby wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger, because there was no place in the inn.

And then suddenly there is a great cry and song of praise,

“a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’ ”

Together with the shepherds, we are left stunned, awed, overwhelmed, because of what we have seen and heard.

## **INCARNATION – GOD WITH US**

But what have we seen?

We have seen a baby born. But more than that: we have caught the glimpse of a new world, the possibility of hope and new life – because God has come amongst us.

The Nicene Creed defines and explains the birth of Jesus in this way:

“For us and our salvation he (the Lord Jesus Christ) came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man.”

Christmas is a celebration of the incarnation – Jesus, who is fully God, is born amongst us and embodies the full extent of what it means to be a human being.

The birth of Jesus is

“God’s heart towards us, God’s heart towards creation, God’s heart

towards the cosmos. It doesn't get better than the incarnation: **God with us**" (Wendy- The Warehouse, Cape Town).

“What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive year after year in a world notorious for dashing all hopes is the haunting dream that the child who was born that day may yet be born again even in us” (Frederick Beuchner). **God in us.**

It is, quite simply, incredible. The birth of Jesus flies in the face of sceptics and cynics, those who actively mock the Christian faith, or those who simply turn their backs on this great wonder. The baby born in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago – and this is not some myth or folk tale we are talking about, but a real birth of a real person – was and is God coming amongst us. God incarnate. God in human form. God in the flesh. God comes in his Son Jesus to restore and heal our world. In Jesus, God comes to live a human life with all its joys and sorrows, the struggles and challenges we experience and endure – and by his life and death and resurrection he makes it possible for us to become new people. To enter into eternal life. To set us free from the power of sin and evil and death. That we may become what St Paul refers to as “a new creation” (2 Cor 5). St John's Gospel speaks of us being “born again” (Jn 3).

## **AND SO...**

I find Christmas to be a complex time. longing and lament; joy and celebration and grief and sadness; the carnage on our roads, the excessive drinking and partying of this time of year, the stark contrasts between rich and poor; our hopes for the year ahead: this brief day of Christmas doesn't seem to make any difference. We are not more loving, the world is not a better place, we face the same struggles we faced yesterday. Evil and wrong still hold sway. Potholes and Eskom and questionable governance here in Makana continue to plague us. We wake up tomorrow and nothing has changed.

But on another level, everything has changed. Because God is with us. Because as we open our hearts and lives to the Lord, we are made

new people. Christ is born in us. We are given a glimpse into wonder and worship. We see something of glory and majesty. We gather to worship. We come to acknowledge this baby, this child, as our Saviour and Lord, the Prince of Peace. And as we worship, we become part of a new life and a new world.

## **CONCLUSION**

The birth of Jesus means in the most profound way that God is with us.

Let us be people of hope, because God has come amongst us.

Let us be people of trust, that God will continue to be part of our world, part of our lives, in our hearts...

Let us be people who believe, because Jesus who is the truth has been shown to us.

Let us be people who love, because God who loves has come to us.

Lord Jesus, be born in us today.

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