

Friday 25th December 2020 Cathedral, Grahamstown 8.30 a.m.		CHRISTMAS DAY	
Isaiah 52:7-10	Ps 98	Hebrews 1:1-4	
		Luke 2:1-20	
GOD WITH US			

“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’” (Luke 2:15).

CHRISTMAS DURING COVID

We are gathered today around the familiar and much-loved nativity scene. In front of us are Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus, and the shepherds. Like them, we have come to Bethlehem, to see this thing which has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us. Jesus Christ is born. God is with us.

But is it even possible to say this? Is God with us, truly with us, at *this* time, at *this* Christmas? With all that is happening? Can we truly celebrate the birth of Christ, the presence of God with us, at this Covid Christmas? As our country staggers under the blows of this second wave of Covid, as people we know and love have tested positive; as loved ones are dying; as each day brings its awful news - is God really with us?

We are not the first to ask this question. Over the centuries, in times of great hardship, this cry of desolation has been

heard. During terror and violence and warfare, during famines, during epidemics that have ravaged the world's population, people have turned in longing and despair, and cried out, Is God with us?

This is certainly Christmas with a difference, isn't it. Covid has changed everything. Much of the year has been a narrative of despair. Precious lives have been lost. So much has had to be cancelled or postponed. The cost to the economy, and its impact on each one of us, is felt by us all. And there have been other events that have marked this year: the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests against racism; horrible instances of gender-based violence, which tragically saw a spike during lockdown; the ongoing concern in our country over state capture and corruption; terror attacks in northern Mozambique, and much else besides.

Recently, the Washington Post invited readers to suggest the word or phrase that for them best summed up 2020. The top two words were: *exhausting* – like a drawn-out, slow motion car accident that just keeps dragging on; *loss* – the loss of life; a lost year for students; the loss of income, jobs. Another word was *unpredictability*. It has also been an unpredictable and completely abnormal year. One person put it like this: “It's like looking both ways before crossing the street and then being hit by a submarine”¹.

¹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/lifestyle/2020-in-one-word/>
Accessed 23rd December 2020

It is easy to be overwhelmed with a narrative of despair. But this morning, our scripture readings this morning give us a different narrative, one of hope and joy and new birth. In the face of despair and desolation and loss and exhaustion, the Christmas scriptures invite us to recognise our experiences of God's grace.

READINGS

The words from the prophet Isaiah (our first reading) are a song of praise: “Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people...” (Isaiah 52:9). In their historical context, these are words of comfort spoken at a time when Jerusalem the holy city was indeed in ruins, the heart of the nation had been destroyed. God through the prophet Isaiah announced hope and promise not only at that time to a city in ruins, but also to us today: to broken lives, to families in pain, to each one of us. Beneath our smiling faces we may be living with heartache and struggle and confusion. God assures us that there is a future. There is hope for those who live in despair. To counter the exhaustion and loss of this past year, we are given *comfort and hope and joy*.

Psalm 98 echoes this song of hope: “O sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous things...” (Ps 98:1) - a word of hope and promise because of what God has done and will do. God will continue to give his grace and strength to us.

And then the story, much loved and so familiar, of the birth of Jesus Christ. The first few verses (1-7) seem really

ordinary. They give us the historical context. It is the time of the Roman Emperor Augustus and the governor Quirinius – figures of great power. The Roman empire covered all the known world. The emperor decreed a census – probably for the purposes of taxation – nobody’s favourite! Ordinary people like Mary and Joseph, or you and me, would have had no choice but to obey when the decree for the census went out. So, in spite of the fact that Mary was heavily pregnant and near her time, Joseph and Mary travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And there, in the stable, because there was no room in the inn, as we know so well, Mary gives birth to the baby Jesus. Nothing unusual – or so it seems. This is simply another baby born under difficult and inconvenient circumstances.

But then the story changes. It changes for Mary and Joseph, and it changes for us also. A group of shepherds are keeping watch over their flock by night. An angel of the Lord stands before them, the glory of the Lord shines around them, and they are terrified. But the angel reassures them – do not be afraid - and then proclaims the birth in Bethlehem, the city of David, of the Messiah, the Lord, the one sent by God to save us all. A great choir of angels sing praises, the shepherds hurry to Bethlehem, they find the baby just as they had been told; and they go on their way, “glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

In these few verses we have presented to us the wonder and mystery and joy and delight of Christmas. The angels – who are messengers from God - speak of this child which has been born as Saviour, Messiah, and Lord – his three-4

fold titles. This child is born in Bethlehem, the city of David – and so this child is the fulfilment of all the expectations, all the Hebrew - Old Testament - prophecies over the centuries. This child is the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one; he is the one sent by God to save not only God’s chosen people, but to save the whole world. He is Lord of all.

With the shepherds, we are witnesses of the incarnation – the birth of the Son of God, the Word made flesh (Jn 1:1-5); God incarnate – God in the flesh - the coming of God into the world as a human being. It’s worth digging a bit deeper into this concept, this idea, because quite frankly it is mind blowing.

The consistent witness of the New Testament writings is that this child born is not simply a good man, a good person, or perhaps a prophet, but the Son of God, a quite unique revelation of God to the world through his son Jesus; and that by believing in him, by receiving him, we receive eternal life; we touch something of God; we ourselves become children of God.

This child is “the coming [in a quite unique way] of the eternal son of God into human history”². That’s the significance of linking the birth of Jesus to the reign of the emperor Augustus and the governor Quirinius, linking the birth to a particular historical context.

² Ward, K., 2000. *Christianity. A short introduction*, 51

This child is the fulfilment of all our searching and longing, all our attempts to find and touch the divine. A great deal of religion, of whatever type, consists of our efforts to find and touch and encounter God. In Jesus God has reached out and found and encountered us.

To paraphrase something that CS Lewis wrote: “The Son of God became a human being to enable human beings to become the sons and daughters of God.”

This child born is “the reflection of God’s glory, the exact imprint of God’s very being, who sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3).

Keith Ward puts it like this:

“God did not just speak words through a prophet, or make himself known in inner experience, or in mighty acts of liberation in history. God actually ‘became flesh’, taking form as a human being, so that he would fully share in the human condition, and be known by human beings in the fullest possible way”³.

This baby born today, whom we worship, is God in human form – the Son sent by the Father to reveal the Father’s love to us, and to set the whole world free from the power of sin and evil, to save us from the greed and hatred and anger that dominates our lives. Proclaimed by angels, worshipped by shepherds and wise men, followed by

³ Ward, 51

millions, believed and trusted over the centuries. The Son of God, Emmanuel, God with us.

GOD WITH US

To the cry, the question, “is God with us?” the birth of Jesus gives an emphatic *yes*.

“As we gaze on the manger, we see Jesus born into our human reality as a baby. God chooses to step into the chaos”⁴.

As we look back over this past year, God has been present in the chaos of 2020. As the effects of lockdown intensified and hunger became more evident, we have seen the emergence of community networks, food parcels and community kitchens. People rallied round in support. There has been an outpouring of compassion. People joining hands to make a difference. Food4Futures; the Cathedral Covid care fund; the recent intervention by *Gift of the Givers* at Settlers Hospital to equip wards for covid patients. Signs that God is amongst us.

God is with us. God is amongst us in the great longing for meaning, as people – everyone, not necessarily religious or Christian - have tried to make sense of what is happening to us.

⁴ **Christmas hope in an uncertain world** by Annemarie Paulin-Campbell, Jesuit Institute, 24th December 2020

Frederick Buechner wrote: “It may well be a post-Christian age that we are living in, but I cannot think of an age that in its own way has looked with more wistfulness and fervour [for a sign of the presence of Christ] toward the ghost at least of Christ”⁵. This great searching for meaning, trying to make sense of what is happening.

There has been an upwelling of prayer and a greater focus on the life of prayer, as we have had to dig deep. We have had to draw on all the resources that we could find so as to survive. And we have found that God is with us. This year has not only been a year of exhaustion, or a year of loss, or a year of chaos, or a year of unpredictability. It has also been a year of unfolding, a year of encounter, a year of discovery of the grace and presence of God.

God is with us. In all our longings for new beginnings, new opportunities, new birth, God is with us. God is with us in our longings for justice; God is with us in our rage at the high levels of gender-based violence; God is with us in our sufferings and heartaches and struggles; God is with us in our sadness and grief; God is with us in our lives, in our joys.

CONCLUSION

With the Christ child, Jesus, in our hearts and lives, we face the future. We face the uncertainty of the Covid pandemic; we face the darkness around us; we face the despair and cynicism; the sense of hopelessness that

⁵ *The Hungering Dark*

threatens to overwhelm us – we face all this with Christ in our hearts. God is with us.

Let us be Christ-bearers. Let us be signs of love and hope.

And we pray in the words of the hymn:

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;

Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas Angels, the great glad tidings tell:

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

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Dean of Grahamstown
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