

Christmas Day
Year B - December 25th, 2020 - 8am & 9.30am

Isaiah 62:6-12
Psalm 97
Titus 3:4-8a
Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

I was scrolling through my newsfeed the other morning when a headline jumped out at me and made me do a serious double-take. The headline was this: “Archbishop of Canterbury declares - don’t go to Church this Christmas!”

Understandably, I was shocked, and a little confused. “what was he thinking? Isn’t he supposed to be encouraging people to go to Church? What will all the priests in the Church of England be thinking when they hear that their Archbishop is telling everyone to stay home this year, and not go the services they have been preparing for? And what about the offertory they will miss out on???”

Of course, as I read further, I realized the Archbishop was being a little nuanced than the stark headline would have me believe. He was speaking in the context of the dire situation in the UK at the moment with regard to COVID, and actually was urging people who were elderly or in high-risk categories to be thoughtful about their decisions, and that perhaps attending tightly packed services in the current situation was not advisable. Which, naturally, makes very good sense.

Archbishop Welby then went on to say that for these people in particular, there were other options - to listen to a service on the radio or watch on the BBC. Or, where possible, to watch any of the myriad of livestream services on the internet. “Anything”, he said, “that reminded you of the importance of the day that we celebrate, and so that you can hear again the good news of Christmas.”

Which made me think again - what *is* the good news of Christmas? What is it, really, that if everything else was stripped away, and distilled down, that is left? The absolute core of the message of this day?

And I think the answer to that lies at the heart of our Gospel passage this morning. Simple shepherds, out in the fields, are going about their very ordinary existence. When, suddenly, their lives are disrupted - interrupted.

(There's a lot of that in the Christmas story, by the way - lives upended by visits from Angels; sleep hard to find amidst dreams and visions; plans and any sense of control being wrenched away).

And the message of the Angels who appeared was both simple, yet incredibly profound... "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

"Glory to God", they proclaim. We humans are actually made for relationship - we are wired for it. Even the most introverted people in the world (believe me, I know!!) find greater meaning and richer lives when in relationship. We enrich one another by our gifts and our interactions; we create memories together which bring joy to our hearts.

But more than that, we are also made to be in union with God; to enter into relationship with the God who created us and the world. And sometimes, the best, even the only way in which we can find to do that is to give praise and glory to God!

When we look at the beauty and the wonder of creation around us, even voicelessly we proclaim "Glory to God." When our heart is singing, and our lives are full, we say "thanks be to God". And when, in the darkness, or with a broken heart and through eyes full of tears we cry out to God, even in this we acknowledge our relationship and our dependence on this God to whom we also give our praise and glory.

“And on earth peace among those whom he favors!”. The second part of the Angels’ message is perhaps the most difficult for us. Peace is such an elusive concept - so difficult to grasp and hang on to. In my prayers I will often use a beautiful phrase I heard once - “O Lord, may there be Peace; peace in the world, peace in our homes, peace in our hearts.”

I’m not sure which of those is the hardest to attain, to be honest. We are all too well aware of the ways in which our world is not ruled by peace - but rather by fear, or political influence, or military might. And we pray fervently for these situations. But we are equally conscious of the ways that our own lives are marked by a lack of peace; how uncertainty and stress and worry can disrupt our peace, and our lives are the poorer for it.

Archbishop Welby acknowledged in the article I began with that this year would be a difficult one for many people. We know just how 2020 has been challenging on so many levels - relationally; economically; physically; mentally; and spiritually. And so he said this:

“Christmas will be, for many people, different. But it’s not cancelled, because at the heart of Christmas is Jesus coming into the world, God coming into the world. This is a moment of God saying: ‘I am with you in the mess and I have overcome the darkness. There is hope.’”

This is the message of the Angels to those shepherds. This is the true meaning of Christmas. “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Thank God for the birth of Jesus. Thank God for God’s goodness and kindness to us and the whole world. Thank God that he doesn’t leave us to our own devices but has a plan for the world that we see unfolding in Jesus Christ.

This year especially, more than most years, we join with the heavenly host in praising God and saying: Glory to God in the highest heaven for the peace that will come to the world he favours.

To you, and to your families and your loved ones I extend the blessing of the Word made Flesh - may Christ be born anew in you, and his light guide you in your lives ahead.

In the name of God. Amen