

Christmas 2020

Titus 3.4-8a

Luke 2.1-20

The Most Reverend Geoffrey Smith

Many years I find myself saying, as December 25th gets closer - it doesn't feel like Christmas. It can't be Christmas already. Christmas has come way too fast. I don't know whether I feel this way because I am just too busy, or I don't take enough time to prepare, but many years that's the way I feel. This year though- this year I can say - it's time for Christmas. It's the right time for Christmas. At last, it's Christmas.

This is for at least two reasons. The first is that after a very tough and quite serious year many of us need a break, we need a distraction, we need to spend some time with family and friends and have some fun. It's been a serious year with bushfires and the pandemic and all the rest of the challenges and we need fun. Christmas is very welcome this year for that reason.

The second reason why it's the right time for Christmas is that this year's experience of COVID and all that has gone with it and all the other challenges have brought us much closer to the situation of the first Christmas, so we are better able to understand why that first Christmas, the birth of Jesus, was and is so important.

The popular image of the circumstances of Jesus birth often portrayed by Christmas cards and Christmas carols is one of peace and goodwill. The reality of course was quite different. Palestine was oppressed by the occupying Roman empire. The people were not free to live their lives or practice their religion. They lived under all kinds of restrictions which curtailed their liberty and gave an overall sense of oppression and difficulty and frustration. They yearned for freedom. They prayed for release from their captives and all their restrictions.

As well various parties within Judaism were jockeying for influence and enthusiastically trying to recruit people to their cause. Not only were the people of Israel oppressed from without, but they were also divided within.

Rather than a situation of peace and goodwill, tranquillity and love, Bethlehem at the time of the birth of Jesus was a place of hardship, restrictions, disunity and confusion.

Mary and Joseph weren't planning to be in Bethlehem for the birth of their child. They were forced, they were made to go there because of a population census for the purposes of taxation. For them travel restrictions did not mean they couldn't travel, but rather they had to travel. Into that situation, the Christ child was born.

The coming of Christ was a foundational moment; the beginning of the final movement in God's plan for the world - which can be described as the healing of all things. The healing of the world, its peoples and the planet itself. That is God's plan and Jesus birth was the start of the plan being carried through.

This year particularly we are terribly aware of the need for the healing of the world. The planet is groaning under the depredations and carelessness of humanity. Millions are sick, not just because of coronavirus but with all kinds of physical and mental illness. There is incredible uncertainty and a heavy weariness. The global community is racked by division and tribalism. There is much beauty and joy in the world, but the planet and its people really need healing. Just as they did when Jesus was born.

Jesus birth was greeted with great joy because his coming was so needed and so longed for.

The first Bible reading for tonight from St Pauls letter to Titus chapter 3, describes Jesus birth as the 'goodness and kindness of God'. God loves the world so much that he showed that love in Jesus birth.

The third of the readings from Luke chapter 2 records what are described as the 'heavenly host' praising God in response to Jesus birth and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours'.

Jesus birth was a really big deal and was recognised as that.

When we celebrate Christmas after a settled and normal year Christmas is good, but this year after a really tough year Christmas is great because this year especially, we are very aware of how great the need of the world is. How many challenges we have and just how much we need saving.

We humans are capable of many wonderful things but the challenges before us are huge, and this years' experience of the enormity of the pandemic, with the constant change and uncertainty associated with it, the ongoing wars and tensions around the world, the groaning of the planet through natural disaster and change in the climate makes us realise just how challenged we are and big our need is.

The great news of Christmas is that God loves the world so much that God came among us to begin the healing of all things. Christmas is not just a sign of God's love- it is certainly that, but a sign of God's love doing something, heading somewhere, making a difference, beginning the healing of all things, the healing of the planet, the healing of the people, the healing of the whole creation. God's love is not passive but full of action.

We see this in Jesus ministry. He didn't just offer love, he healed people, he reconnected people with each other and with God, he brought wholeness wherever he went. All signs of what God was beginning through him.

Clearly, we are still waiting for God to bring to completion what he started at Bethlehem. This year has made that very obvious. We look forward to that time of the healing of all things, and we pray for that time, but we don't wait passively. God calls us to be co-workers in this healing. Whenever we do something which protects or repairs the environment, we are cooperating with God in this healing work. Whenever we show love and kindness and care to anyone in need, we are cooperating with God in God's healing vision. Whenever we act for peace and seek reconciliation we are contributing to the healing of the world. Whenever we give to welfare or charity, we are working with God in this healing process. Whenever we help someone connect or reconnect with God we are contributing to God's work of wholeness.

And this doesn't have to be on a grand scale. If we all do our bit and see ourselves as co-workers with God, we make a difference, and this difference will never be lost.

There is a verse at the end of chapter 15 of St Paul's first letter to the Christians in Corinth that I find very encouraging. It's chapter 15 verse 58: Paul says, 'therefore my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain'. Our labour is not in vain. What we do to cooperate with God in the healing of the world will not be lost or discarded but will contribute to the end result we all need.

We know the planet and its people need saving. We know we need God's help. We cannot do it ourselves. That's very clear especially this year.

Maybe this year has been something of a wake-up call. Maybe the addition of the pandemic to all the other challenges we face has been enough to make us realise just how much we need God. That's why this is the right time for Christmas, because we are in much the same situation as the people were who greeted Jesus' birth with such joy. They knew that only God could save them. Only God could set them free of the hardships and difficulties they faced. And there at Christmas was proof that God hadn't forgotten them. They were not god-forsaken but God-cherished.

Christmas is always a nice time. Christmas is always a great time to give thanks, and to spend time with friends and families and enjoy some down time. This year Christmas is much more real. This year we know we need Christmas, not as a distraction from reality, but because of that reality. We know the world needs saving, and the birth of Jesus Christ is the proof God has that plan underway.

When the healing of all things will take place, we don't know. What we do know is that it will happen, and, in the meantime, we have a part to play.

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.

May this Christmas be marked by heartfelt praise to God. Trust in God's promised future. And co-operation by us in God's plan for the healing of all things. Amen.