

Christmas Day

We heard Isaiah, writing in the 8th century BC, say in our first reading:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace.

Peace is as topical a gift to pray for this Christmas as any other; despite the song of the angels we can't avoid the conflict in Syria, the divisions in the USA following the presidential election, fears for civil rights in Hong Kong, the sad plight of Christians in Iran and elsewhere. But it is likely to be the world-wide challenges of the pandemic and our local experience of them that are foremost in our minds today. How do we find peace, God's peace, the peace which passes all understanding, in the face of this life-limiting and life-threatening disease.

An answer may be found in our other two readings this morning. It's about the *nearness* of God: the event we celebrate today is not God dropping into the world for a while and then moving on, but staying and joining in. We heard from Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, ...

He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being...

That is Jesus, whom today we worship as a little child, the focus of the opening verses of John's Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory...

The Word being made flesh describes God being born in reduced human circumstances, yet with the 'exact imprint of his being' as Hebrews puts it. *That* phrase was intended to evoke a three-dimensional coin-portrait, miraculously real to the ancient world, like a hologram is to us, but, unlike a hologram, something concrete and tangible. The little child we hear about in Luke and Matthew has in him not just the shared stuff of our human life, but also God who created that life. Once that has happened, God is with us and loneliness need be no more. Christmas is about God's commitment to our messy lives, and his invitation to relationship, offered in solidarity; we do not celebrate a command accompanied by a rule book. You may choose whether or not to accept the invitation. But if you accept, isolation need not be loneliness, a message with particular resonance this year.

And all that follows, of life and light and glory, may be ours as well if we only accept the significance of our not being alone, not being at a critical distance from what truly matters. Jesus' birth, the 'Word made flesh', reminds us that we have in *us*, in our embodied selves, the capacity for eternal life, and that capacity is shared with the drug addict and the homeless schizophrenic as well as our more comfortable selves. True life does not depend upon our environment or circumstances, but on proximity to God, which is, we proclaim today, precisely, gifted,.

John proclaims in a poetic and philosophical phrase that we are *not* alone; that the

special quality of God, the '*glory*', is available even now to our human senses as a result of the first Christmas. It was seen and touched then in a squalling baby; it *is* seen and touched here this morning in the simplest staples of existence, bread and wine.

Whatever joy or sorrow, unfinished business, unresolved problems, elation or exhaustion, *bonhomie* or bad temper, *ennui* or effervescence you inhabit today, know that here you *can* also see the glory, and can carry it with you when you go out from here. That glory of God among us is present in chaos *and* in peace; all things will never be controlled or resolved by us, but if we respond in *love* to God loving us, there will be true peace and nothing to fear.