

Christmas Eve 2020

Luke 2: 1- 20

Comfort and Joy

This evening we have heard familiar words. Familiar words from Isaiah, from Titus and from the gospel according to Luke. I guess, like me, the gospel reading may be the most familiar to you of the three readings we have had tonight. There is, frankly, something reassuring, captivating, and comfortable about listening to a story we already know.

I can recall reading the same stories over and over to my daughters when they were young; I am pretty certain that one of the first words my eldest daughter learnt was, 'again'! Despite knowing the story, there was a sense of anticipation for the favourite bits, for bits that resulted in a giggle, for bits that were a surprise even though they had been heard many times before. There was a sense of the known, dwelling in a story that I daren't try and miss out any bits of so I could get my dinner. There was a comfort in hearing the same stories, in knowing what was to come but looking forward to it anyway. And then there were the questions. Despite being the same story, sometimes I realised it was being received differently; perhaps because of what had happened during the day; perhaps just because the young mind would wander and wonder, and out would pop a question, or sometimes a statement.

And I hope tonight we can all conjure up that same wondrous and receptive state of a young child listening to a story; almost as if for the first time.

This last nine months has been a unique experience for us all. Alongside the normal and abnormal life events - joys, trials and tribulations - that we would have had to navigate on our pilgrimage

through life in 2020, we have also had to contend with the COVID19 pandemic. I am sure each of us has found aspects that we unexpectedly adapted to very well, whereas other aspects we struggled with. And these things we could cope with or struggle with could change from week to week as the year unfolded. As someone who gets energy to be alone by socialising, I have had to find ways to be social and connect with people so I can feel OK on my own. Despite having a love of reading, my ability to concentrate has meant I have struggled to read many books this year – not that it has stopped me buying them! Even one of my most introverted friends has said he has found this time challenging and his attention span has become much shorter.

I think this last year has helped people gain a better understanding and appreciation of the struggles that some people go through in their normal lives, and for the most part people have been more accommodating, more understanding of other people's personality quirks, more aware of the burdens that people are carrying in their everyday lives. People have gone out of their way to help others; quite often people who up to this year were not known to them. This is for me, a glimpse of God's kingdom; where there is far less judgement of others, where people are given more slack, where people seek to support someone they see is struggling, where small gestures of help or concern really do make a massive difference to the lives of others. Where people help friend and stranger. May we continue with this awareness of the needs of others, and actively work to help others when eventually this pandemic is over.

After a year of uncertainty, of concern for the health of relatives and friends, of concern that we may catch COVID19 or unwittingly be a carrier, it is comforting to listen to and dwell in the familiar story of the birth of our Saviour. It feels like a much-needed Sabbath discipline to rest a while in this story. To feel safe, to snuggle down and listen to it being read, or to read it ourselves. To feel like a young

child being told a familiar story; waiting with eager anticipation for our favourite bits; to be surprised as a word or phrase in the text seems to speak to us in a different way.

God came down to us in the form of a helpless baby. God came to save us, to show us that shepherds and others with no wealth, power or authority were so valued that they were the first to hear the good news. Shepherds were an important part of the story – they were uneducated and given their roles could in no way meet the Jewish purity laws. God came to show humankind what was important in our lives; to love one another; to do our best to love our God and not let our own agenda subvert God's simple message of love and peace that we are charged with enacting in our lives. It is a simple message that Jesus was able to summarise so simply, but which we still manage to corrupt as we work to our own devices and desires.

But tonight, and during these twelve days of Christmas, at a time when much of the northern hemisphere slows or sleeps, and after such a unique year, I feel we are called to dwell in this wondrous story; maybe curled up with a rug or duvet, with a pet or a teddy-bear. To read it through, to offer a child-like 'again' and to start over with the story once more. To take it slowly. To be happy to read it again. To delight in its familiarity. To be surprised how it speaks to us. To let our minds wander and wonder. To exclaim and ask questions; not necessarily ones directed at anyone but perhaps offered in prayer to God.

Now, given this past year, it feels appropriate to dwell in the story, to read it with comfort and joy, to rest and pray. May you find comfort and joy in this most wondrous story. May you be like the shepherds who returned to their flocks, *glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen*. To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

I wish you a peaceful Christmas.