

Sunday 8th January 2023

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God is love, let us adore God by sharing God's love.

God is ever present, around us and within us, we worship together in God.

Gifts

Waiting in the stillness for Incarnation;

Sky searching for the emerging star.

Meanwhile, in another place, enigmatic angels herald a newborn King.

Behold! Glad tidings of great joy. enter into the new creation, amidst animals and straw.

Royal signs are cast off and an incredible child smiles for the world.

Now the star is shining, greeting a new day and a new way.

Gathering gifts, wise men set off, into the night, to welcome the child.

Frankincense, myrrh, gold and sheep, today we bring our gifts, simple and pure, ourselves and our hearts.

Heather Whyte (2008)

Epiphany is taken to end the Christmas celebrations, decorations taken down by 12th night, the eve of epiphany. So, the decorations are put away for another year, the Easter eggs are in the shops, and life goes on. However, the Epiphany is the celebration of the gifts brought to Jesus by the wise men, or women. Gifts for a lifetime, gold to ensure travel in times of need, myrrh for healing and frankincense as a sign and reminder of calling.

There is a saying that a dog is for life not just for Christmas, I would want to add that Christmas is for life not just for a day (or 12 days if you want to follow the song). How do we keep the meaning of Christmas at the heart of our day to day lives, how do we live as Christmasians ?

If we celebrate Christmas every year, once a year and pack it away again then we are living Groundhog Day, repeating the same patterns, singing the same carols, telling the same story and never moving on, never living out the story for the rest of the year. Jesus calls us to break the pattern and keep Christmas alive.

If you are a church where others use the building during the week, how do you remind people who come into your building that we have just celebrated something really special? If you have no other users and the building lies empty during the week how do you take the message out to neighbours, friends and family, to delivery people, how does Christmas make a difference to your relationships?

What difference does Christmas make to the rest of your year?

Readings Isaiah 42:1-9 (The Voice)

Matthew 3:13-17

Reflection

Behold! Isaiah uses this word to announce something new – a new theme or a new line to an existing theme. Behold! Surprise!

Our reading from Isaiah 42 is the first of what are often referred to as the Servant Songs. There has been much debate over the centuries about who the servant referred to might be and many think these passages refer specifically to Jesus. On one level that may be the case but the passages were written long before the birth of Jesus at a time when the people of Israel were in exile. Israel understood itself to have a special arrangement with God, but after a period of exile they were no longer sure that was the case, it felt as if God had left them.

The prophet explains that God has not left them but their status has changed, there is to come a new chosen one, someone else is to be the light to the nations. The Jewish people have always believed these passages referred to the Messiah, the one who would come to liberate them from oppression. Whilst many Christians have understood Jesus as the Messiah, and therefore make the link to the servant in this passage, most Jews have not accepted Jesus as the Messiah and they are still waiting for the long promised Servant.

Christmas is a celebration of the birth of Jesus, a story which evolved through first century writings, mainly Matthew and Luke, although each gives a different version with Luke the storyteller weaving a fairy tale story of angels and shepherds and a stable, whilst Matthew is more concerned with the genealogy of Jesus

and the visit of the wise men with their significant gifts. Matthew also gives us the flight to Egypt, the family as refugees escaping the wrath and vindictiveness of Herod.

Jesus in the stories we read modelled what it means to live life at peace with yourself, and to make the best choices possible. Mark has him saying that he has not come to be served but to serve, a definite nod to the Servant in the Isaiah passages. A servant who is meek but not weak, doesn't want a fuss but simply gets on with making a difference, he prioritises those the world rejects or ignores.

In verse 5-7 we hear talk of God's call to this servant and we hear this echoed in Matthew at the baptism of Jesus – I love you, you belong to me, I am proud of you. These are such important words for relationships and often we forget how important it is to actually say them, we assume the other person knows, and sometimes that is not the case. There is the call to liberate people from whatever oppresses them, whatever holds them captive and that will be different for everyone and we see that in Jesus' response to the different people he meets. He asks what he can do for them – do you want to be healed is not such a daft question as there are plenty of people in the world for whom their disability has become their identity and without it they would feel diminished. We read about the rich young man who was told by Jesus to give away everything, and we think that is what Jesus would say to everyone but we are wrong, for the rich young man was held captive by the wealth that prevented his interdependence and he needed to let go of that security.

I often wonder if we have come full circle and the message that Israel heard is now the message the church needs to hear. What would Jesus challenge the church with? Have we become captive to the security of the familiar? Have years of missing generations stalled the evolution of the church and made it less relevant to the majority of people? Jesus calls people to an adventure, a risky way of life.

Story – The creature who flew

Imagine if you will, a river flowing along towards the sea. On the riverbed is a community of creatures whose whole way of life is determined by their need to cling to the rocks and reeds which also lie on the riverbed. The only thing these creatures have known since their birth is resisting the river and clinging to the certainty of their the home they know.

Further up the river is a similar community with the same way of life, but in this community one creature is frustrated by that way of life and the constant clinging. He thinks to himself that there must be more to life, even though he cannot see another way. One day he decides to let go and go with the flow of the river, trusting that the current knows where it is going. He shares his decision with those creatures around him and they laugh and call him a fool. If you let go, they say, the river will through you against the rocks and you will be smashed and injured, maybe even die. However, the creature is determined saying, 'Clinging, is not life.'

Having made his decision the creature takes a deep breath and lets go. Immediately he finds himself in the current of the river and sure enough he finds himself tossed and turned, and smashed against the rocks. In time, however, when he continues to resist grabbing onto the reeds he find himself rising from the bottom, away from the rocks, and flowing free.

As he flows downstream he passes the other communities like the one he has left and as they see this creature like themselves flowing freely these other communities are amazed. They cry out in wonder at the miracle of a creature like themselves free. The wonder amongst themselves is this the Messiah come to save us?

As he passes the creature hears their cries and shouts down that he is no more the messiah than they are, he simply let go and trusted the river. The river wants them to be free and they simply need to let go and they too will fly. This voyage of adventure is the true life.

But the other creatures are too busy discussing this Messiah, all the while continuing to cling to the rocks. When they look up, the creature who flew is long gone on his adventure and the communities he passed were left wondering and building legends about their Saviour.

Based on an idea by Richard Bach, in 'Illusions: the adventures of a reluctant Messiah'

Behold! Said the prophet, there is a new way. Come said Jesus, follow a new way. Are we ready to let go and be Christmas people, allowing ourselves to be freed from the securities that hold us, and instead walk the way of love.

Do we worship God, or the church?

Are we clinging on and dying of boredom, or are we ready to let go and see where we end up?

Are we ready to live in the divine energy revealed by Jesus, or will we continue to cling to the familiar for fear of being battered against the rocks.

It is never too late for an adventure, we are never too old to start.

Behold!

To epiphany and beyond

The journey was not straightforward:

often we had to change course, go in a new direction.

Everything around was changing,
people, places, prophecies and power.

In the twinkling of a star the
polarity shifted and a new journey began,
heralded by angels
and anchored in the vulnerability and miracle of birth.

Not for us the security of tradition,
you came and called us to leave all behind and embark on something new.

And we do, at least most of the time but
now and again we forget, and long for the
days when we knew what was expected of us and how to achieve it.

But that was then and this is now and
expecting today to be the same as yesterday is not
your way. For you each day is a new adventure,
onward and upward towards the kingdom,
never knowing what tomorrow will bring;
daring to dream, and holding out hope and pointing in faith
to epiphany and beyond.

Heather Whyte Jan 07