

The light which came into being at Bethlehem

A sermon for the first Sunday of Christmas 2014

BCP Collect:

ALMIGHTY God, who hast given us thy only-begotten Son to take our nature upon him, and as at this time to be born of a pure virgin: Grant that we being regenerate, and made thy children by adoption and grace. may daily be renewed by thy Holy Spirit; through the same our Lord Jesus Christ, who liveth and reigneth with thee and the same Spirit ever, one God, world without end. Amen.

Additional Collect:

Almighty God, you have poured upon us the new light of your incarnate Word: Grant that this light, enkindled in our hearts, may shine forth in our lives; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

God in Trinity,
eternal unity of perfect love:
gather the nations to be one family,
and draw us into your holy life
through the birth of Emmanuel,
our Lord Jesus Christ.

BCP Epistle:

The Epistle is written in fourth chapter of Paul's letter to the Galatians beginning at the 1st verse.

- ¹My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property;
²but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father.
³So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world.
⁴But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,
⁵in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.
⁶And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'
⁷So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God

Here endeth the Epistle

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ as written in the 1st Chapter of St Matthew beginning at the 18th verse ...

Glory to you O Lord

Matthew 1: 18-25 [from BCP]

- ¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they

lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',
which means, 'God is with us.'

²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

This is the gospel of our Lord

Illustration:

Did you see it??

A light shone bright in the night sky this Christmas Eve

.

.... it rose in the west at precisely 5.20pm

**and travelled in a huge arc
from horizon to horizon in little less than 10 minutes**

And as I watched I couldn't help but wonder
who else was sharing this same brilliant spectacle and
at the same time asking myself
what might be on their minds too?

*"Hey kids come and have a look at this
it must be Santa ..."*

.... and they would have been astonished!!

Coincidentally others might have reflected
that within minutes
that very same light in the sky
would be appearing over the town of Bethlehem

.... and they might have pondered on the meaning of it all!!

And yet others would check out their smart phone app
before realising that it was in truth;

*.... two Americans
.... three Russians
.... and an Italian
passing by at a rate of 17,000 mph
on their magnificent journey aboard the International
Space Station*

And had you seen that light on Wednesday night *[as I did]*
and whatever connotation grabs you
I'd like to think there's a fair chance
your thoughts included words such as;

surprise – curiosity - puzzlement - wonder – awe

Link;

So spare a thought *[then]* for those select few
who all those years ago witnessed *[first-hand]*
that other mighty light above Bethlehem
and try and image how they reacted

*".... could this be for real
.... is this a sign [or something]?
.... might this be the thing that we [the Jewish nation]
have been told to look for all these years??"*

Move;

I think it's worth remembering that
what happened that first Christmas actually had its origins
going way back in time;

Remember it was **Isaiah** who told the people to **look forward**

[.... to look forward] to God rescuing His people;

*".... instantly recognisable
.... leading them in victory"*

It was **Hebrews** that recalled
that great line of prophets saying;

"... this arrival is the climax to the whole of history"

[and] **John** who consciously echoed Genesis
with those words that *[even today]*
sends a shudders down anyone's the spine;

".... in the beginning" "

And so across the generations
all have every right to feel;

[well]

*surprised – and curious – and puzzled - and astonished – and
amazed [and a whole lot more besides]
by nothing less than God's divine intervention ...*

That night He chose *[His divine solution]*
was to giving us a few pounds *[a kilo-or two]*
of crying baby.

When God assumes flesh he doesn't take power;

.... but vulnerability,
.... need,
.... dependence.

God the baby is so small
that he leaves room for all of us to ignore Him,
to glance and pass on.

The heart and origin of creation is easily overlooked.

This is less Big Bang than faint cry.

God was born fully human.

A witness to this birth is not like
a witnessing a comet or an asteroid or indeed the ISS
which is seen and noted but has little or no effect on the one
that sees it.

The first to witness to this birth;

.... are the shepherds and magi,
.... John the Baptist,
.... the gospel writers
.... and hosts of Christians through the centuries,
in their lives and their deaths,
in words and deeds.

If we respond [*if we witness*] the birth as they did
this small baby [*that God gives us so much space to ignore*]
fills our whole world,
changes what we see when we look,
catches us up and takes us with him in life,
through death and into all eternity.

Belief [*putting ourselves and trusting our lives
into the power of this child*];
[.... the man he became,
.... the crucified saviour,
.... the risen and ascended Christ]

enables us to become children of God,

and our whole being is absolutely [*and irrevocably*]
transformed for ever

God's way of being human
shows us
what being human truly means.

According to the gospel of Jesus Christ
to be human means being **vulnerable** [*not safe*]

Our pride is humbled by God needing swaddling.

Our wisdom is confounded by the illogicality of God's baby cries.

Love is demonstrated not by grasping power
but by lowering yourself so you can raise the fallen.

The humility of God provokes us to seek [*to awaken*]
what is best;

.... in every person we meet,
.... every group that we encounter

God's vulnerability is seen in overwhelming self-giving.

When as individuals or societies

.... we grab for power

.... compete for resources

.... and neglect the weakest and most vulnerable amongst us

we neglect Christ himself.

Where people are measured in their worth only by what they can
produce [*what economic value they have*]

then Christ is denied

and our own humanity corrupted.

The great icons of Christ for us are all those of vulnerability;

.... **a baby,**

.... **a man dying [*abandoned on a cross*]**

.... bread and wine [*that can be crushed and spilt*]

Yet from the vulnerability we get life;

.... complete

.... [*and*] eternal.

The vulnerable God was born into a world that rejected him,
and yet **He** loved it without limits.

As we look around our world at injustice and conflict
he calls us to His pattern of love:

.... we see victims and perpetrators,

and in loving them without limits
we imitate Christ and challenge every injustice
and any demeaning of human beings.

This week whilst we sing of Bethlehem,
we see injustices in Palestine and Israel,
where land is taken or rockets are fired,
and the innocent suffer.

We see injustice in the ever more seriously threatened Christian
communities of the Middle East.

Christians in the region are attacked and massacred,
driven into exile from an area in which their presence has always
been central,
.... undoubted,
.... essential,
.... faithful

We see injustices at home.

Even in a recovering economy,
Christians, *[the servants of a vulnerable and poor Saviour]*
need to act;
.... to serve
.... and love *[and feed]* the poor:

.... they need also to challenge the causes of poverty.

But that said Christ's birth is not politics,
it is love expressed.

Our response is not political,
but love delivered in hope.

Archbishop Justin puts it this way;

*"The action of the churches in the last five years is extraordinary,
reaching out in ways not seen since 1945.*

*Yet no society can be content where misery and want exist,
unless through our love collectively
we also challenge the greed and selfishness behind it.*

*We will speak and act best when we are caught up in following the
vulnerable God as His disciples in His way.*

*Then His love fills us,
.... His compassion drives us on,
.... compassion for every person,
.... at every point of life or wealth or power.*

Shift;

When individual Christians and the church together believe,
and act on that belief,
every human attitude is challenged,
especially about the poor,
and the world changes.

We follow the God, who is Saviour,

whose word of love was found in action and word.

We are called to act,
whether at home or around the world,
not just lament.

Jesus rescues us from our brokenness
and makes us ***carriers of life and light.***

He calls for that great line of witnesses that has swept down
through the centuries to be continued today by a church
that is confident in the message of God's love and truth.

This is the church to which you and I belong

It will always be an untidy church because we are in a
vulnerable,
.... untidy,
.... broken world.

Yet when we see the fact of Christ's birth,
.... hear the witnesses,
.... receive the life he gives
.... and respond in ***passionate discipleship***

then all our vulnerabilities,
.... muddles and weaknesses

are carried in ***His*** strength.

The Christian meaning of Christmas

is unconditional love received,
love overflowing into a frequently love-lost world.

A light shone bright in the night sky that Christmas Eve

a light to reveal to the nations

***that this child [seemingly so small and vulnerable and
innocuous]***

***has power and potential to bring all of life
to a glorious possibility.***

***And the question we must ask ourselves this Christmas season
and beyond***

***Have you – have I
Seen that light??***

Amen

Proper Prefaces

Upon Christmas Day, and seven days after.

BECAUSE thou didst give Jesus Christ thine only Son to be born as at this time for us; who, by the operation of the Holy Ghost, was made very man of the substance of the Virgin Mary his mother; and that without spot of sin, to make us clean from all sin. Therefore with Angels,

BCP Christmas Intercessions

Cycle of Prayer:

In this season of unity
we recall Jesus prayed that we might all be one
and we affirm our solidarity
with Christians around the world
and remember especially
the Dioceses of Southwell & Nottingham,
Borg (Norway) and Koforidua (Ghana)

World Peace:

In this season of peace
we celebrate the peacemakers who listen to the angel's song
and seek to bring peace to the people on earth
And yet as we stand on the vulnerable edge of violence in
many parts of the world;

we especially remember the people of
The Congo, Syria, Afghanistan Palestine and Israel.

May the child we welcome into our lives,
our homes

and this place
be a reminder of another way and a greater light,
that unites every race under heaven.

Holy Word:

In this season we share [*and celebrate*] this vision of a baby
who was sent to remind us that
we are all members of God's family
and we are so infinitely precious to God
that Jesus dies to show how much he loves us

Sick and Infirm:

In this season of compassion
we remember the one who
touched those with leprosy
restored sight to the blind
brought peace to the disturbed
and enabled the lame to walk

come now to all those who are sick in body,
mind and spirit
and bring your healing touch and renewing grace

and in our prayers we remember especially

*Jacqui Priestley,
for David Oliver, (Janet Robinson's father),
George McCabe (Paul's father),
Tony & Mary Frost,
Jean Bagnall,*

*Daniella (Sam Fugill's friend),
Susan Lee (Linda Fugill's sister),
Rachel Cryer,
Anne & Tom
Bennett, Violet Jones,
George Dowsell (John's brother),
Robin Michie, and Mary Dowsell & their families*

and for all those who have lost loved ones this year,
may God's love bring them comfort.