

# CHRISTMAS DAY 2020

Isaiah 9. 2-7

Psalms 96

Hebrews 1. 1-4

Luke 2. 1-20

All we have from Luke are these few words about Jesus' birth: *she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

The understanding we have inherited about where Jesus was born is that it was some kind of building which housed animals. With our European heritage we most commonly understand this to be some kind of stable. In reality this place would have been a kind of ancient world "truck stop", smelly and full of a great mill of humanity, many who lived on the edge of society. This world Jesus was born into was deeply concerned with religious purity. In this regard this truck stop would have been considered an "unclean" place, an impure place. Jesus is born outside the bounds of respectable society. Our Christmassy images of the birth of Jesus are of a rustic stable scene with clean hay and kindly shepherds. Nothing could be further from the truth. It was the sort of place most of us would feel anxious about being in.

This truck stop would have been full of a great mill of humanity; travellers from many places, labourers, rough people, itinerants. There was no room in the inn but attached to the inn was this place that housed travellers' animals. The image we have of the stable scene is the little nuclear family of Joseph, Mary and the baby, welcoming shepherds and wise men. But the scene would have included stable hands and others coming and going, checking and feeding animals, and most likely others for whom there also was no room. This is a very public place, a kind of rooming house, overflowing at the seams.

The messiness of this scene is so in contrast to what we try and do with Christmas. It is as though, as we approach Christmas, we make a great rush to prove that all is OK – that we can tie our lives up with a bow, all neat and tidy. That the messiness of our lives is swept away. A Christmas card with Jesus in a clean tidy stable completes this image. Our apocalyptic rush to Christmas Day feels like an attempt to ensure all is right with the world. That all of us have enough to bestow generosity to those around us, that we gather with the belief that all our relationships are healthy and without blemish, that everything is bright and shiny. Sadly, this is not so and the hopes for this bright kind of Christmas only heightens our grief and pain about all that feels broken. For too many of us, Christmas is full of pain and anxiety.

But if we look, truly look, at the Christ-child pushed beyond the edge of acceptability into this truck stop of broken humanity we see that maybe his story is a bit like the story for too many. That the brokenness we too often experience is also his brokenness; he is our companion. God, with us.

As I get older, I hear too many stories of the disappointment, the grief and the rage that too many experience around Christmas; stories of brokenness from within the bounds of seeming

respectability; of the nuclear family. Not from the people we might find in the truck stops of our world but from those whose lives on the surface appear to be all together, but in truth, by their own admission, are not. In this Feast of the Nativity – that we call Christmas Day – we are invited to reflect on what it means for God to be with us – Emanuel; present with us. Not Jesus here to beam us up and out of here, not to layer some veneer over our pain, but to be present in both the truck stops of our world and in our own inner truck stops, where too much feels to be broken down and not able to go any further.

Wisdom tells us that as humans we form our greatest bonds, our greatest and our deepest of human connections, when we share the brokenness of our human journey together. Our conventional ways of being preoccupied with youth, with glamour, with wealth and success only serve to separate us from each other, to pit us against each other in contests of who can keep ahead – who’s winning at the moment. Are not most of our family spats at Christmas about who’s at the top of the pile in the family? In these struggles for pre-eminence we are not united but separated from each other. Paradoxically, it is in our human fragility that we become bonded with each other and share ourselves to the very depths of our being, our human being. It is in this way that Jesus is God with us. It begins here, in the messiness of the nativity we mark today and ends in the passion of the cross. God with us. It is being willing to share in love and humility in the messiness of each other’s lives that we share the deepest bonds of being human together.

But this is not just about us and our own immediate family circle. The call of Jesus is to find him in the least of these – that is the oppressed, the prisoner, the naked, the hungry. For us, the asylum seekers who are ousted from detention centre to hotel after hotel. For the homeless of this city, at risk after months of accommodation of being on the streets again. For the successful these are the necessary collateral damage of our success. For the church our call is to continue to seek Jesus in fragile and vulnerable humanity. We don’t do it because we are powerful and others are not but because we have come to recognise our own brokenness and can share the grace we have come to discover – sharing it from the place of our own fragile humanity. As Paul says, when I am weak, then I am strong.

In the hymn O little town of Bethlehem in the last verse we sing:

O holy child of Bethlehem,  
descend to us, we pray;  
cast out our sin and enter in,  
be born in us today.

*We hear the Christmas angels  
their great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us,  
our Lord Immanuel.*

Our sin is not so much those things we do or don’t do but that sense within that we have fallen short of who we can be when we are truly ourselves; fully ourselves. Into this gap between what we have done or who we have been and who we know in our hearts we can be, there so easily speaks an accusing voice that condemns and drives us further from ourselves and each other. But the one who is God with us – who is born in this ambiguous, seemingly unacceptable place, speaks the mercy of God to us, not an accusing voice but a word of compassion, of kindness, of joy, of peace and most especially of love. Today, of love.

The invitation of Christmas is to find him born in all his fragility in us in those fragile places in ourselves where we least expect to find him and to be overcome with joy and delight in the grace of God.

And so, with the angels we can also sing:

Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favours.

Andrew Boyle