

Prologue and Sermon for 15th December 2024 – Carol Service

Preached at St John's Baillieston

John 1:1-14

Prologue

Among those of us with a Christian faith, it is often said that Advent is a season of waiting and anticipation. We participate in waiting with Mary and Joseph for the birth of their son, and we wait with the people of Israel for the birth of their, and our, Saviour, and we wait with all humanity to celebrate the appearance of God himself, our creator, in human form.

It's a weird sort of waiting, since all these things have already happened, and we continue to wait for them every year, but as the Welsh poet and priest R.S. Thomas so memorably wrote in his poem *Kneeling*, "The Meaning is in the Waiting." It is in the waiting that we find the mystery, magic and awe of anticipation. In the waiting, we see and hear things with new eyes and ears, as if for the first time. In the waiting, we pay attention to things we may normally have walked past unnoticed.

But each year, most of us are also waiting for relief from something, some pain or illness or trauma that we long to pass through and leave behind. Across the world there are wars and oppression and natural disasters, and everyone waits with longing and anguish for peace and reconciliation – for recovery, reconciliation, and normality to return.

For some, the experience of today may be little different to that of the people of Judea two thousand and twenty-some years ago, who were living under violent occupation by Roman legions and being led by a mixture of collaborators and zealots, unable to do much more than endure and survive. They just wanted a return to normality too – freedom to be the people God had called them to be.

So, as we listen to this old story of Jesus' birth once again, I invite you to pay attention to the longings of your own heart. I wonder what is it that you are most waiting and yearning for, in this darkest month of the year. What is your deepest prayer to the God who makes himself human to share in our struggle and our pain?

Sermon

The beautiful poetic beginning of John's gospel describes one of the cornerstones of the Christian faith, that the almighty God who created the universe, chose to save us from ourselves, not by an act of superhero power from the sky, but by humbly making himself human – and not even a powerful human, but a very vulnerable one, born to a family in difficult circumstances under Roman occupation, soon forced to flee to seek refuge in Egypt.

Even in human terms, it's a moving story, this tale of the manger in Bethlehem, the simple-hearted but socially-outcast shepherds, the choirs of angels, the patiently watching animals, the magi with gifts from the east following the star, the selfish and fearful king Herod seeking baby Jesus for all the wrong reasons.

But when the baby is revealed as Almighty God, the Creator of All Things, the story becomes so profound that wise and devout old monks and nuns would plunge to their creaking knees during the final verse of John's gospel prologue: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory".

Earlier in the bible, God's glory was something humanity was never allowed to see. "You cannot see my face," God says to Moses in Exodus, "for no one shall see me and live". God's presence meant death for the unworthy, and yet John speaks about this almighty Creator with the tenderness of a brother; "he lived among us", he says.

It's hard for us today to quite grasp what it means for God to become human and live among us. Can our minds and hearts comprehend, if only for a moment, that the baby in the manger is actually God? It's the sort of realisation that, if it lands just right, can make your jaw drop and your eyes go wide and the bottom fall out of your stomach with a lurch. Every year I think I'm going to do a better job of it, but every year I realise that John has already said it perfectly. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us".

Can you imagine being among the first believers to have sat at the feet of St John to hear this story? Listen, he might have said, the God who made everything, including you... I met him. I walked through Galilee and Judea with him. I loved him. I watched him die on the Cross and I saw him when he had risen again.

Preachers have no proof regarding this Word made flesh. We know it does something to us, this idea that God did not stand far off but – as the prayer goes – “met us in [his] son and brought us home”. Even if Jesus were ‘only’ a holy teacher and wise healer, I'd still love him, but what if I could countenance even for a moment the idea that Jesus is the divinity that created and sustains the world in love, that the same God is here now in the Holy Spirit, not totally distant, impossible to relate to, but entirely at home in the messiness of material reality, wounded and abused as we all are, outcast and never really understood?

I don't know how God becomes a man, but the idea of it makes everything sacred, reveals every one of our breaths to be full of God's love.

Because of the Incarnation, because of God's love bursting forth into creation in Jesus Christ, we can glimpse what God is truly like, we can reach out our hands and our hearts to love him, and let him love us, without hesitation.

The early church was abuzz with people trying to figure out what all this meant. Irenaeus, an early Church Father said: “The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ,

through His transcendent love, became what we are, that He might bring us to be what He is Himself". And another Church father, Athanasius, said bluntly: "The Son of God became man so that we might become God."

Incredibly, behind the simple, sweet story of the manger, shepherds, angels, sheep and wise men, there's a God who wants us to know him, who wants us to experience being loved by him, who wants us to be transformed by that love to become like him, in every way that matters. If that is something you want as well, then you're in the right place, with the right people, at precisely the right time. "For to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God." Amen.

Christmas Blessing

May the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the perseverance of the wise men, the obedience of Joseph and Mary and the peace of the Christ-child be yours this Christmas; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. Amen.