

## **Sermon for 25<sup>th</sup> December 2024, Year C, Christmas Day**

### **Preached at St Serf Shettleston**

#### **Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20**

#### **Sermon**

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined... For a child has been born for us, a son given to us... and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace”.

When Isaiah wrote or spoke those words several hundred years before Jesus was born, he didn't have a little baby born in stable to poor working class, temporarily homeless parents in mind. Isaiah was really expecting a proper king – one who would correct all the injustices his people were suffering under the corrupt and selfish leaders of their age and cause prosperity and joy to rise once again. He certainly wouldn't have expected Jesus, centuries later, whose first guests – the shepherds – were considered unclean by the pious because they worked and slept with animals, and whose second guests were foreigners from the east who followed an alien religion.

But this is what Luke's gospel wants to emphasise. He's writing to the people on the margins, the outsiders, the left-behinds, the poor, the disabled, the sick, the homeless, the refugees, the foreigners. He's writing to all these and saying Jesus has come not only because he loves you and because you are worthy of love, but he has come *as* one of you.

If you can accept it, Jesus is God Incarnate choosing to become like us, in a small town in backwater region of an occupied nation.

Often the Christian faith has tended to focus on the end of Jesus' life, on his three years of ministry culminating in the last journey to Jerusalem where the political and religious powers of the day hang him on the cross for his audacity to challenge their moral authority. We tend to focus on that Cross, on our

confusion about why such a good man had to die so young, when his good work was just beginning to make progress.

But the Incarnation, the birth of Jesus, is often overlooked, relegated to nativity plays and carol services. What should be the most devastatingly moving and profound moment in all of human history has often become merely a pretty scene on a Christmas card or Advent calendar.

In West Malling abbey where I was a novice nun, at Christmas we would read the prologue to John's Gospel – the one that starts “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”, and at the end of verse 14, all the sisters and the entire church would plunge to our knees in silent adoration at the wonder of it all.

Of course, given the age of some of the sisters it sometimes took a while for them all to get back up again, but the point is that there is something about the idea of God becoming Man that fundamentally changes everything about our lives in the light of it.

Archbishop Michael Ramsay once said that “God is Christlike, and in Him there is no unChristlikeness at all”, and I really feel like I should fall silent for five minutes for us just to think about that.

What the Archbishop was saying is that when we look at Jesus, in the manger, and his ministry, and on the Cross, we are literally seeing God behaving as God is. As Jesus said bluntly to his friend Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen God the Father”.

It's hard to get our heads around. The Almighty Creator of the universe is the one born in that crib. The one who created atoms and quarks and time and space and black holes and quantum mechanics also created you and me, out of love. And then came and participated in it all. It's far too crazy, but what if it's true?

In stories, gods usually seem to love rich temples and palaces and cathedrals and having all the answers, but not the real one. *He* poses the deep questions instead: what does it mean to be human? What is the purpose of our lives? If there are

any answers, he doesn't tell us, except in parables. This God prefers to walk with us along the way, delighting in the journey.

Richard Rohr, the American Franciscan friar says that the Incarnation is necessary, otherwise we and all of creation are forever separated from the one who created and loves us. "Without Incarnation," he says, "it is *not* an enchanted universe but somehow an empty one". Incarnation makes everything spiritual and sacred. With Incarnation, no longer is divine love way beyond our reach, waiting for us in another life; with Incarnation, God demonstrates that the spiritual and secular worlds are not separate but have always been united. God is present, here, now, and always, born in our hearts each day just as he was born in a crib on *that* day.

Born in our hearts each day; he's still at it; he's continually choosing to be born in the hearts of outsiders, misfits, the lonely, the differently abled, the elderly and the young, the queer and the people struggling with ill health or mental trauma. In other words, all of us.

You are the humble temple of the Spirit now. You are the stable and the manger. You are the Incarnation. You are the child. The Bread and the Wine which we will shortly share – this is to remind us that we are the body of Christ. We are, in fact, what we eat.

The birth of Jesus Christ is not just a nostalgic myth from long, long ago. The birth of Jesus is God saying, this is who I am, and this is who you are, and I will always be with you, closer to you than your own heart, as we walk this journey of love together.