

Immanuel God with us

1 January 2022

Second of Christmas

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Jeremiah 31.7-14

Ephesians 1.3-14

John 1.10-18

Happy Christmas

My guess is the last time we saw each other the key thing we were saying was 'Happy Christmas'. So now I guess it's more 'how did your Christmas go?'

We can put a lot of hope and expectation into our celebrations. But I hope usually this all goes well. I remember one Christmas Day when a sister-in-law was rushed to hospital and gave birth to a daughter. That was a surprise. I remember another when a guest had some rather unexpected swelling of their face. We were all very concerned and distracted.

For many people this time of year is a long break between Christmas and the New Year. For others particularly if their employment is frontline they may not even get the Bank Holidays.

But however it worked out we will all be hoping a good Christmas in some way was had by all.

Season of Christmas

In terms of the church year Christmas is not just the immediate day to be marked but nearly a fortnight to reflect on Jesus' birth. There are the twelve days of Christmas that take us to The Epiphany, the visit of the Magi on the six of January.

A lot can be contained within a Carol service or midnight Holy Communion. Having some time to unpack what is there can be very fruitful.

The preparation and expectation of Advent leads to Jesus' birth. We pay attention to the announcement by angels, the presence of shepherds, God being with us in the title Emmanuel. Of course we also put the arrival of the Magi into this too. But that is stealing a march on the Epiphany.

Stories of Christmas

Each of these dimensions, even if briefly, is presented as a story. Each one can be entered into by way of imagination. We can put ourselves in the place of the individuals involved. We can transfer them into a modern situation and see how relevant they still are. There remain powerful

lessons to learn in what at first sight seem to be very familiar accounts.

Such themes as the family that have to live in a stable resonate with the homeless in our society. The family that have to flee the murderous intent of the king brings to mind the movements of refugees because of the war in Ukraine.

New Year's resolutions

We now have a New Year and maybe last night you had that familiar conversation about what resolution you would take up for this New Year.

Perhaps it's the same one you chose twelve months ago because it's still not complete! Perhaps you feel a bit conflicted because when you heard someone else's it seemed rather more demanding than what you had in mind!

I remember many years ago that conversation happening at a New Year's party and I felt too shy to say what was really on my mind. So I shared something plausible and the conversation moved to someone else.

There can be things about who we are that are not easy to put into words. We may feel embarrassed about expressing what is truly heartfelt. Maybe it has always remained something of a secret.

At that party the desire that had been in my mind for the year ahead was to grow in my Christian Faith. I actually told the people I wanted to learn the guitar. I still can't play the guitar; and I'm a vicar. So perhaps the things that are most sensitive and tentative are what we need to pay attention to.

New Year stories

New Year is a traditional time to take stock. We have a number of days away from the familiar routine. We mix with people who may give us a fresh perspective. It looks like we are on a division between the old which is passing and the new that we are going to be addressing.

But suppose the way we do resolutions is a bit too cut and dried. Maybe we need that sort of Christmas season approach of taking life and dwelling on it to get to the depths of who we are.

There are the stories of Christmas that tell us about God beginning a new work and we need to dwell on. There may also be the stories we have told ourselves, about who we are, that we need to listen to afresh and find a new interpretation for.

To take a simple example I hear people say they are not very good with technology. In the last couple of decades the world has been transformed in communications, commerce and gathering information. You are seriously disenfranchised if you do not have confidence with computers, tablets and mobile phones. Few people will say they can't read or write or they can't drive a car. But each of these are demanding skills that take time to acquire but enriched our lives immensely.

Some people may not have had an opportunity to learn about technology. But to tell a story about yourself so you're a character who cannot do it is an impediment to embracing the world in a new way. It is changing the narrative about our lives that gives us new opportunities and freedoms.

My inability to play the guitar could be addressed by taking lessons and practice. I might still not be brilliant but I might become a useful musician. But I would have to begin by saying it is possible.

The narrative of The Word

This season of Christmas is an opportunity to find new depths in the events of Jesus birth. At New Year there is an opportunity to reflect on the account we tell ourselves about aspects of our own lives.

The opening chapter of John's Gospel, of which we heard a portion today, introduces us to the Word of God. We are used to words being narratives, stories, explanations or even doctrines. John is taking the whole creative activity of God and saying this is a word. You could imagine this being expressed through scientific theory or mathematical formula. But John says this word of creativity is shown to us as the person who is Jesus Christ.

For John the origin and truth of the universe is about Jesus Christ. He says 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him'.

For John being human and living a full life is about Jesus Christ. He says 'the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son'

But this creative action of God continues. If the universe or the people in it have problems, the Jesus is present to be the saviour. John says 'From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ'.

Immanuel God with us

I expect it is true of all Christian spirituality that we are seeking to know God in our lives. That is the point of celebrating Christmas. It is not just to enjoy the story or find fresh features we had missed before. We are seeking to know God.

In the same way as Christians we reflect on our lives and make resolutions. We are not just trying to become more knowledgeable or more skilful. Life is a gift from God we seek more of it and in so doing we develop and flourish.

Our society largely conducts itself without any reference to God. If people want to do that they are left to their own devices as if they were in a world apart. Our problem is that living in this society we may have gathered this rather split view. In writing his Gospel John doesn't see it like that. For John this is God's world. He has always been present. The reality has been opened up in new ways through Jesus Christ. We have the wonderful privilege of having received so much of the truth and experience of this.

To be blessed

We found much of this life described in our reading from the book of Ephesians this morning. It is written by Saint Paul who had been wonderfully converted to Christianity on the road to Damascus and set on a life of sharing all that he had discovered in Jesus Christ.

The passage opened with Paul writing 'blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.' Paul has found he is accepted by God and filled with a life that is blessed. Paul has found meaning and fulfilment.

Now our society will want to take blessed to mean happy and prosperous; and such things will take place. But Paul means something much deeper and it will include the gift of courage, the need to be sacrificial, the reality of being humble. All of which were present in the way that Jesus Christ lived.

The life that is blessed is measured by The Word of God in the life of Christ. It might not always look like what our society approves of. It might not all come to fulfilment in our earthly life. But we are invited to share in the eternal purposes of God and to know his life at work in ours.