



Sermon, St Andrew's, Christmas 2020
Gospel: St John, chapter 1, verses 1-14.



*May I speak in the Christmas joy and peace of the Babe of Bethlehem, who brings us the Father's love and hands us His Spirit, one God, Father, Son and Holy Ghost. **Amen.***

What in the world do you want for Christmas?

There's an old tale of 3 ambassadors to the UN being asked that.

The American ambassador says "peace in the Middle East".

The Russian ambassador says "nuclear disarmament".

The British ambassador says "that's very kind of you, I'd quite like a box of crystallised fruits please".

What in the world do you want for Christmas?

Christmas is perhaps 3 things: our joy and crown, our high point of the year, with all that need and expectation; Christ's birthday, in the stable, in peace and in humility, with all there is to learn from *that*; and, most precious, importantly and often most secretly, the proclamation of the Incarnation in the wonderful Gospel just read: the Good News of Christ's identity and whole human life, of which His birth is one of several great steps;

So to preach on Christmas is to attempt to address 3 huge things.

We can come to Christmas with such a burden of expectation, with a year's-worth of emotional need, heaped-up hopes for this great feast: this year, of course, we want an end to this wretched little virus; many of us are simply so weary of it all: I'm reminded of Kipling's words to the Navy over a century ago: have we "learned great faith and little fear and a high heart in distress, and how to suffer each sodden year of heaped-up weariness"? This year can feel like that to many of us.

We can come to Christmas strangely under-prepared amongst busyness and current restrictions; or strangely over-prepared from anticipation, from the rich diversity of poetry, imagery which flocks to the manger; I can barely speak a word without treading on the text of another carol!

And of course all of Creation comes to this moment with the expectations of the ages; from the ancient Patriarchs' first strange encounters with Almighty God, through all the Prophets, particularly perhaps from the poetry of Isaiah we've been reading through Advent, seeing through a glass darkly, not knowing quite what to hope for or expect, but who perhaps comes closest in seeing the suffering servant whom this Babe becomes; to John the Baptist; and Mary, Mother of our Lord:

"the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight".

What in the world do you want for Christmas?

So we are come to this day of days, this king of feasts, when the expectations of all the ages are met with - a birth - a baby. This moment when God Himself comes to earth, but not as we expect: yes, there is glory: but the glory of humility - of vulnerability - in stillness - in silence - *peace*. And that song, the message of the angels, is so near the heart of it all - that God's Word to the earth is: *peace on earth, goodwill toward men*. The world has ignored it, missed it, frequently seemingly drowned and destroyed it - and yet, as Tennyson wrote of the message, "then tolled the bells more loud and deep, 'God is not dead, nor doth He sleep'".

What in the world do you want for Christmas?

Peace on earth, goodwill toward men.

The great teacher Lancelot Andrewes preached on this day of “the Word without a word - the infant Word unable to speak a word - a wonder sure” - and to preach on peace is often to destroy it with words. This year, we may not be able to sing “Come and adore Him”, but I ask you, in spirit, in the middle of this sermon, to just leave me a moment on my knees, gazing into the stable, the manger, the crib; if you would hear afresh the message of peace, then let us simply be still, and silent, in the surprise of this mystery.

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...

But that is not the end of the story. I have said that to preach at Christmas is to preach on 3 things: the expectation; the moment; and the Incarnation: our dear Christ’s life, of which Christmas is the beginning, not the whole tale. “Trace we the Babe, who hath redeemed our loss, from His poor manger to His bitter Cross”. St John has written this better than I can ever speak, and I love His Gospel too much to ruin it, I hope, by my imperfect words: But we are called to set our beloved Lord’s birth in the context of His everlasting light; and of His rejection - that saddest of lines: “He was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world knew Him not”. All too soon, Herod will slaughter the innocents in Bethlehem (and tragically, not much has changed there in that respect), and the Holy Family will be refugees. The Babe of Bethlehem grows up to be “despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief” - and, by doing so, to transform our understanding of life. He comes, not “just” to be *Emmanuel*,

God with us - to, as Rowan Williams has said, “to show that human nature can carry the Divine image”; but also, “Christ entered our life in order to change it”.

St John’s Gospel is too beautiful to unwrap - and I can’t unwrap it all for you. Only you can tell what change the gift of the Christ child means, this year and lifelong, in your own life - Christ is for life, not just for Christmas.

What in the world do you want for Christmas?

The Christian story is not one of naive triumphalism. The Wise Men foresee Christ’s death from His birth: He comes to lead us to Gethsemane, to the garden of tears - and through it, to change it into the Garden of Resurrection: and then to hand on to us His Spirit and say “go and do thou likewise”.

I kneel when I proclaim the Incarnation:

“The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us”.

But the true gift of Christmas is not perhaps the Babe, but what He offers each of us:

“But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His Name”.

We are not to stay for ever kneeling in awe at the manger, but to be regenerated ourselves (Cranmer’s Collect’s word here reminds me of Dr Who!) through adoption and grace.

What then is our hope? What hope do we seek now, desperately need now, this day, this year?

We are offered afresh the same truth: the light shined in the darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not - did not understand it, and did not overcome it.

May we kindle light from light now, here and wherever we read of this Word.

Merry Christmas? Yes: not superficial enforced jollity, but that warmth of knowing oneself not to be alone: God is with us.

May you know deep, quiet joy and peace, from your heart to all whose lives you touch. The world is changed one person at a time - will only change as we change.

God comes down to transform the world, starting from your heart.

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 the great glad tidings tell;

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.

Happy Christmas to us all,

In The Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

Amen.