

Christmas Day Yc 24

Let us pray, Lord God, Heavenly Father, as we reflect upon what we hear in the scriptures and our lives. May we come to a deeper experience of the revelation, give of yourself to us in Jesus. Through him and the guiding and leading of the Holy Spirit, may we grow in love and be led into all truth, and we pray this in Jesus' name.

Amazing words of many of the carols, and in particular, once in Royal David's city, 'he came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all'.

This touches into the deep mystery of our celebration today of the birth of Christ.

And of course, in a sense, every Christmas is a new beginning. It's a time for us to reflect and experience more deeply what is unfolding still in the life of Jesus. It's important, the German philosopher Nietzsche said that historians look backwards and eventually believe backwards.

And we need to be careful with that as Christians as well, that we don't just keep looking backwards, but rather we look for God now. Because in looking for God now, and in this very moment, in the now is that whole story of the birth of Jesus and who we believe and understand him to be. The whole reflection about he came down from heaven, from earth, he came to earth, sorry, he came down to earth from heaven, and then the angelic choir, we get this whole realm of another dimension of life being open to us.

And yet we need to sit and see how we hear it in the now.

Three years ago, when the Webb telescope was put up on Christmas Day, 2021, I actually preached a sermon on it because I'm puzzled as to why a telescope can look back in time to virtually 400 million years before the Big Bang, the Big Bang having taken place about 13.7 billion years ago. So it's a pretty amazing phenomena.

But just recently I discovered that it's about now, because how the telescope works is it is now, but it's able to go so far out into the universe that it can find planets that have actually died, they've gone. We're still seeing the light, but they've gone, you know, stars and all sorts of cosmological entities. So there's this amazing mystery of what it is to be focused in now and to be celebrating Christmas now and what that means for us in our life journey.

So it's not the past, somehow the birth of Christ is still present with us, just as the Webb telescope can pick up things from so far back. So our Webb telescopes, if you like, can pick up what it is for Jesus who had been born as a human being. Now, of course, that helps us to tune into his whole life, and we look at his birth through his death, resurrection and ascension, but that is an important journey that unfolds.

There are traditional terms that are sometimes used for the interpretation of scripture which sound a bit heavy. One of them is that we look at the spiritual meaning of scripture and we say it's typological. That means an event further back in the past refers to an event later but still in the past.

And so much of the fulfilment of the prophecies in the birth of Jesus is like that. We see references that are typological, and one of the key ones was when Abraham was asked to sacrifice his son Isaac, and that seemed to be pointing to the death of Christ on the cross. And, of course, we have allegory, which is a moral we might take out of it, but the one that's really interesting is that where an event that's happened, like the birth of Jesus, points to something that's yet to come.

And that's really where Christmas is so wonderful for us today, because it speaks of hope. It speaks of hope that we can have a new beginning with God in Christ through the cycle of time. I mean, the linear time is one thing, but this cycle of time means that we come back to Bethlehem in some deep and mysterious way.

One of the challenges we face, of course, is that our story is built up on faith. And I don't wish to go too deeply into that, but faith is defined, say, for instance, in the letter to the Hebrews. 'Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'.

So, 'now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'. And it goes on to say, 'indeed by faith our ancestors received approval. By faith we understand that the world was prepared by the word of God, so that what was first seen was made from things that are not visible'.

And that's a pretty big call today, isn't it? So by faith we realise that the world was created from things that are not visible. Very big call to say, how do we know by faith? So for a moment I'm just going to explore a little bit how the Christmas story speaks into this journey of us growing in faith in our current society.

Mary, if we remember, it was a long journey. It was a tough journey, quite rugged, travelling from Nazareth to Bethlehem on a donkey. So in some ways that represents how hard the journey can be to the place where Christ is born, the place where we can give birth to the Christ. The shepherds and the whole angelic revelation reminds us that the heart of our spirituality and the scriptural story, if you like, is the revelation of God, which is not so much by reason, but it's by God acting and revealing things directly.

And so one path that we have to come to know Christ, just as the shepherds did, is through revelation. And that was probably easier for people in the past to accept than today. I mean, how many people here can say that you've actually, apart from what you've read in scripture, had some sort of revelation from God? Have you had a vision? Remember the day at Pentecost, it says that 'the time will come when young men will see visions and old men will dream dreams'.

This idea of God speaking directly to us, we know it's a very challenging area because it's one also that can lead one into all sorts of delusions. Similarly, of course, we are far more aware today than probably ever before, although I think they were more aware than we think in days gone by, but we're aware of so many different faith traditions. So everybody has strong faith, yet we've got Muslims who have strong faith in the revelation of God through the Prophet Muhammad.

We have the Hindus who have strong faith in their fairly philosophical, metaphysical, revelatory spirituality, though, through the various scriptures that they have. And so we

have these different faith traditions, and even within Christianity we have so much difference. And so we start to say, well, this is challenging because the Bible talks so much about faith.

Jesus talked so much about faith. He talked about being healed through faith. So there's this strong emphasis on faith, yet we live in a society where we are more aware of the challenges to just believing.

Sometimes faith can seem like believing in a flat earth.

So that with the shepherds I raise, it's important to mention that revelation is part of us coming to know Christ.

The wise men who I'm going to give more emphasis to next time I preach in January, they represent the way of the intellect or science and culture, if you like.

They're sitting over there at the moment because they haven't quite made it yet. There's some discussion about how long it took them to get there. But remember, they are a very significant part of the story because they saw the star and they were scientists of their time which included astrology, and they expected there to be a star that would reveal the birth of the Messiah King that they had heard about.

And so they followed their science which led them to Jerusalem, and this is a very important point, led them to Jerusalem. Then they had to inquire of King Herod. He spoke of the prophecy from Micah that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem of Judea.

Then they headed off again. Then they saw the star again. So for me, the wise men represent.

So the wise men represent this whole journey of the culture and science. And I believe that an exciting thing is happening at the moment in the world with the Webb telescope, part of a whole of work that's going on in cosmology, theoretical physics, quantum mechanics.

And I believe you can almost say the statement that science and religion will meet at Bethlehem at the crib, that there is a sudden convergence or Perhaps not a sudden convergence, but there is this amazing convergence taking place which will help people to therefore realise how what was revealed in faith is now, in a sense, being revealed through the path of knowledge, which is not incompatible with how we understand God to be, because Christ came to make known God to us.

And there is this theme in the scriptures about how the Holy Spirit will actually guide us into all truth, will teach us all things. So the convergence of science and religion is a very profound convergence that's taking place. And I think it will help more people to come to faith amidst the complexity of the various faith traditions I've talked about.

And we pray that our hope is that, in fact, religions will start to come together in more deeper and profound ways.

But what's this mean for us personally? And I think this is, at Christmas time, is what we ultimately have to focus on, because the truth of what is revealed in the birth of Jesus is so

important for our journey and the human journey, because in God becoming a human being, in some deep and mysterious way, human nature was changed and we as human beings have a new potential that we did not have prior to his coming. There's a saying of the church fathers, God became man so man could become like God.

A new potential is being opened up in our lives for us to explore what it means to have Christ within us, and a modern spiritual writer, Thomas Keating, wrote, "Mary shows us by the coming of the eternal word in her body that we are lived in by God. God is living in us, not as a statue or a picture, but as an energy ready to direct all our actions moment by moment".

And that idea that Christ being in us is the way for us to learn to live, to nurture the Christ child, to nurture the child within us, and to reflect upon how we can live this life of the God man, if you like, that we can live to our divine potential.

And it's in that that then as more and more people take this inner journey of Christ being born in them, Christ growing within them, then the prophecies will be fulfilled that peace, justice and truth will one day reign amongst the nations.

I'm going to finish with a quote that my wife, Marizel, found this morning that seemed very apt. And because Father Daniel, who's the Roman Catholic priest here in Moe Newborough, he recently went to England and did a seminar on C.S. Lewis and J.R. Tolkien.

And it was an amazing seminar, he said. And I think we're mindful just how profound some of the works are of people like Tolkien and Lewis. So this comes from Lord of the Rings, and Sam is speaking to Frodo.

"It's like in the great stories, Mr Frodo, the ones that really mattered, full of darkness and danger they were, and sometimes you didn't want to know the end, because how could the end be happy? How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad had happened? But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow. Even darkness must pass. A new day will come.

And when the sun shines, it will shine out the clearer. Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant that something, even if you were too small to understand... [Sorry, I'll say that again].

Those were the stories that stayed with you. That meant something, even if you were too small to understand why. But I think, Mr Frodo, I do understand, I know now.

Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back, only they didn't. They kept going, because they were holding on to something. But there is some good in the world, and it's worth fighting for".

In a sense, it's Christ that brings that good into the world. He is the hope that the world can be transformed, the world can change, that the prophecies can be fulfilled. There will come a time when death will be no more.

The final shroud to be removed is death. And I think perhaps I can conclude with one of Leunig's sayings, which makes it so simple.

“Love one another, and you will be happy. It's as simple and difficult as that. Love one another, and you will be happy. It's as simple and difficult as that”.

Let us pray. Lord God, Heavenly Father, as we once again celebrate the birth of your Son, Jesus, give us a deeper understanding of what it means for Him to have taken on our humanity, the divine potential that we receive through His becoming human and the life He lived. Help us to see how He is born in us through the Holy Spirit and how we can nurture the life of Christ within ourselves, growing into the new creation.

We pray this in Jesus' name.

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