

**Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> December 2017**  
**Midnight Mass (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Isaiah 52.7-10**

**NT: Hebrews 1.1-4**

**G: John 1.1-14**

This might be your first Christmas here. If so, you are not alone. It is my first Christmas here too. Usually, at this time every year I would be going home to the Holy Land and joining the thousands of pilgrims in Bethlehem, to see that thing which has come to pass in the place where it all happened. I opted for a peaceful English Christmas this year. The Holy Land is often in the news, as you know. Curious that. But, the more you live there, the more you get to see how the biblical story fits in that context; indeed how the biblical story is still alive and kicking even today. The actors have changed; but the plot remains the same.

Lots of people today say Jerusalem is a very difficult place to be; they add that there will never be peace there. This view was shared a long time ago. In the eighties of the twelfth century, William of Tyre, a medieval historian of the Latin East, wrote about Jerusalem what sounds like a suitable description for today:

Thus the Holy City...with the fervent shifting of events, it often changed masters, and, according to the character of each prince, it experienced both bright and cloudy intervals. Its condition, like that of a sick man grew better or worse in accordance with the exigencies of the times, yet full recovery was impossible. (William of Tyre, *A History of Deeds Done Beyond the Seas*. Vol I: 63-64).

What is the cure for this city? It is after all a city we call holy. In Jerusalem, God claimed a presence and communicated through various prophets we read about in the Bible. Yet, in tonight's reading from the letter to the Hebrews, the writer makes a bold new claim. God, he says, is not interested in sending us information anymore, no more prophets. The climax is the sending of a Son. Why is it that God speaks through a Son? The answer is simple: The healing of the nations, the healing of Jerusalem requires God's own act that changes hearts. We have so far failed to sort it out. This act of God can't depend on information; we need a stronger personal relationship with God. There are things that words cannot change. Words do not change memory; words do not transform the world either. Prophets and words cannot change Jerusalem, 'the city of wrong' as a great Muslim writer called it. If words alone can change the wrong of Jerusalem and with it the world, then the liar and the ideologue would always have their way too.

So, this is why the letter to the Hebrews begins to say 'long ago, God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these days he has spoken to us by a Son'. And, Jesus does not come with a new philosophy; he doesn't come with a new book, or a new religion even. He does not bring information. In him, we meet God's reality in a human story. It's not a superhuman story. It's a human story that knows exactly what the human predicament is. Those of you familiar with the story will know that Jesus, when he is born, goes unrecognized. He is born in insecurity under the threat of Herod's fear of a new king. He becomes a displaced person and flees with his family to Egypt. Instead of a happy peaceful life, he faces conflict with both the religious and political powers in Jerusalem. Jerusalem suddenly

is not simply the place of God's presence. It's also the place that rejects God's presence. Jesus is on trial. We end up at his cross, and then we are told there is a mysterious new dawn after his death, which no one expected, but which nonetheless opened the horizons of his followers further into the mystery of loving and knowing God. Jerusalem is the city where God's faithfulness meets human unfaithfulness.

It makes sense, therefore, to hear the words from St. John's Gospel tonight: 'He was in the world and the world did not know him'. Yet to those who recognize him, he gives authority 'to share in his work', to paraphrase the verse. God's speech to the world is not 'nice information'; it is a helpless babe and a crucified body, who in his Resurrection, abides with us forever. He comes, therefore, not to give us instructions, but to hold our hands and help us know, poor as we are, what it means to be children of God through his life. And by doing so, he gives us the freedom to face our challenges, knowing that through his human life, we see how divine love makes a fresh start with us, and how a room is provided for us to grow and flourish in his company. Because of him, we are able to call God 'Father' and every time we stumble he holds our hand and gives us another fresh start. It's a life long experience and we need to keep at it. That is why Jerusalem is holy after all. It's not holy because everything in it is perfect. It's holy because, in Jerusalem, we see the victory of God's vulnerable faithfulness over the atrocities that political power and religious arrogance inflict on him in his servants and children.

This is the language which the world likes to forget: 'He is in the world and the world did not know him', and prefers not to know him. What is the world's preferred language? The totalitarian systems in the 20<sup>th</sup> century be they Communism,

Fascism, or Nazism attempted to establish a state of affairs where no one can challenge their understanding of humanity. Indeed, they redefined what humanity is. After the Cold War, university scholars talked about what they thought of as 'the end of history'. Today, we have a President in Washington, who, like the emperor Augustus Caesar in Jesus' days, likes to dish out decrees, not only to make 'America great again' in his eyes, but also producing decrees about Jerusalem. His American evangelical supporters have raised the level of messianic expectations on the current President. The world does seem attracted to the fascination of all kinds of 'saviours' just as they did at the time of Jesus' birth!

But, our Christmas celebration tells us something else: 'The Word was made flesh'. The Messiah is not the single charismatic leader with a dedicated political campaign to bring a golden age to Jerusalem. His authority does not depend on problem solving or on the popular vote. Rather, we are told 'the Word was with God and the Word was God'. The letter to the Hebrews put it like this: The Son is appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds; he is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being'. In other words, he is the source of creation. Yet, even when he faces death and human unfaithfulness all the way to the end, he does not fight back with military force. He lives as part of the world where conflict is the norm, where we find no magic words to stop sufferings, either by sword or by pen for that would not make any difference.

John's Gospel will later say, he will overcome the world, but only through bringing the indestructible flow of divine love and self-sacrifice through his God-sized Resurrection, not through military force. That is his glory, 'the glory as of the only

begotten Son of the Father', giving joy in the heart of ordinary human life. The Prophet Isaiah in our first reading calls this 'the salvation of our God'.

I said earlier that the drama is still going on in the Holy Land today. The plot is still the same but the actors have changed. How so? It is so because the people of the Holy Land manage their fears with short term 'toleration' of each other at best. And at worst, they kill goodness when it appears, as was the case with Jesus; religious and political arrogance is all over the place. What we need, instead, is to pause tonight, remember, and get our heads around the shocking fact that it is God who is initiating the relationship with us in the birth of Christ. He does so, not to tell us off, not to revenge, but to remind us that it is all about relationships, deep compassionate relationships with the Babe of Bethlehem and with one another. He heals our unreasonable hearts through this relationship. But, we need, all of us here, courage to face him.

This is not just true for Jerusalem. It is true for us here and in Washington D.C. We need to learn how to build the trusting relationships with our own families, our own children, lots of whom are lost on our streets, with our neighbours, even with our enemies. We need to learn as a Church too how to be more and more the sacrament of this new life brought to us in the Babe of Bethlehem.

And so, as we celebrate tonight, we come to stand where he stands at this Eucharist and at this altar so that we can show in action that there is a different way of doing business together in and because of the Babe of Bethlehem. May you and your family be abundantly blessed this Christmas and in the New Year. He is born, so that you

may have life and have it abundantly! Come and receive him in this Holy Communion. A happy Christmas to you all.

Fr Yazid Said