

**Friday 24th December 2021
Christmas Eve (C)**

Liverpool Parish Church

**OT: Isaiah 52.7-10
NT: Hebrews 1.1-4
G: John 1.1-14**

[1:1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [14] And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only son from the father, full of grace and truth.

Traditionally, Christmas is a season of peace on earth, goodwill to men, joy to the world. But it's also true that the Christmas is often a source of great stress for many people. Buying presents, preparing dinners, completing the end-of-the-year reviews, seeing so many family and friends on Christmas day, and just the pressure to be happy can take its toll on people. Unfortunately, sometimes we ignore Jesus, we miss the point of Christmas, miss the meaning of the incarnation, and miss the idea of God's reconciliation through Christ.

The books of the Old Testament contain the images of God formed by the ancient Jewish people who adapted themselves to hearing God's voice and heard him speak to them regularly through their history. God appears sometimes as a man walking in a garden, sometimes in a flame of fire out of a bush, sometimes as a pillar of fire, and sometimes as a still small voice as he appeared to Elijah. And the prophecies that speak of his coming to be our king and judge speak of him coming as fire and power. Yet, when he comes, when we finally get to see him, it is a surprise that causes us to reimagine the God we thought we knew. He turns out to be that he took on human form.

A lot of people don't think of our gospel reading as a nativity story. It is a familiar Christmas reading, but these days it doesn't seem to capture people's mind like the stories Luke and

Matthew tell. The angel Gabriel comes to Mary– the Roman census and the long cold road from Nazareth to Bethlehem - the birth of the baby so far from home in Nazareth, and his first crib in the animals' feeding trough - the angel choir singing to the shepherds, the long journey of the wise men, and then the escape from King Herod's death squads – this is a wonderful story, and it draws us in and holds our thoughts year by year. Mathew and Luke give us the nativity accounts from an earthly perspective.

We've already heard the opening words of John's Gospel. But listen to them another time. And as you do, think about why they serve as the very best beginning to the original Christmas Story. This is how John begins his Gospel...

[1:1] In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God [now we'll drop down to verse 14].[14] And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

These verses give one of the clearest statements about the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Most scientists think that the earth is about fifty million years old, and we human beings have lived on it for only a tiny fraction of its history. Scientists' best estimate is that the universe is about 13.8 billion years old.

John tells us that He was “in the beginning with God” and that in fact He Himself was God. That's why when we say the Nicene Creed, we use phrase after phrase to declare that Jesus was “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through Him all things were made. “We find the phrase “the Lord came down” in the book of Genesis, Numbers and in the book of Exodus. Considering this, the prophet Isaiah cried out, oh that you would rend the heavens and come down...

Our second reading from Hebrews tells us that God has moved on from speaking words through the prophets of old to speaking through His incarnate Son, who is “the reflection of

God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being .”Even Jesus’ disciple Peter, just a few years after Jesus’ earthly ministry, wrote, “Though you do not now see him ,you believe in Him and rejoice with an indescribable and glorious joy .”Glory is truly a relevant word for Christmas and not just because of ornaments and lights. The Gospel of Luke captures that glory in verse and song. In his Gospel a multitude of angels sing at the birth of Jesus, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours.” In our text, John speaks of that same event and of same glory in a vastly different way.

In John’s gospel, the cross is the supreme example of the glory of Jesus. In other words, the glory of God is indestructible love. And the glory Jesus wants us to see is not the reflection of himself but the reflection of God. John goes a little deeper. What does John mean when he says, ‘We have seen his glory’? John and the other disciples have seen the glory of God in the life of Jesus. it is seen most clearly and movingly as Jesus dies on the cross. This surprises many of us, because we expect ‘glory’ to mean a luminous vision or a dazzling brightness. But glory also means the true worth and eternal weight of something. John says We have seen his glory. Who's we? Well St. John wrote this Gospel, so he certainly saw this glory.

We have seen his glory. Have we? The shepherds went to Bethlehem and found Jesus asleep upon a bed of hay. John saw it when he stood beneath the cross of Jesus. All the disciples saw this glory when Christ showed them the scars in his hands and feet. But I didn't see any of this. Neither did you. So, have we seen his glory?

Many people saw God in the flesh walk the earth. Many believed, but many did not. To truly see the glory of the only begotten Son of the Father requires faith. Faith in the grace God offers through Christ. Faith in the truth of his word. Faith gives us access into the grace of God.

There have been some dark moments this past year. For numerous people in our country, more than ever because of the pandemic, this Christmas will be the first without their loved one. Hundreds of millions of people in the world are thrown into unemployment and hunger and poverty. We can see greater inequality among the people. We have lost too much. Too many are overwhelmed by their fear.

Tomorrow we will gather round with our friends and family. But Christmas is not just making sure there's good news for those we like. It may not feel true, but Christmas is not about who you are with, or even where you are. It is about God always coming to us no matter where we are, no matter the situation in which we find ourselves, or how we are feeling on this day. It is about the Word of God made flesh, born for us. And the Word became flesh and lived among us. These words too are familiar and intimate to us, but they take us much further, deeper into the intimacy of Christmas. Christmas is more than just turkey dinners and presents under the tree. It's more even than family time or thinking of others. We celebrate this season because God came down. We celebrate because of Jesus. When Moses met God on Mount Sinai, he was veiled and for thousands of years the Shekinah, the glory of God, was veiled, until that day when the Word was made flesh. In Jesus we see the true glory of God unveiled, revealed.

Hear John's final line in the Christmas story once more:

Today, the Word becomes flesh and lives among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

Amen

The Revd Tabitha Rao