

# Christmas Day 2020

The familiar words we have just heard from Luke, form, along with Matthew's account, the journey of our celebration of the Saviour's birth, and they will be so familiar to us. Perhaps less familiar are the words from Isaiah – words which might seem a curious choice. We hear of great expectation of a city restored – Jerusalem – *Sought Out, a City Not Forsaken* – a place where *'The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord,'* become a sign of God's love for all people.

*Go through, says Isaiah - go through the gates,  
prepare the way for the people;  
build up, build up the highway,  
clear it of stones,  
lift up an ensign over the peoples.*

Here is the powerful imagery of a restored city, with a series of blessings for the beloved daughter Zion - *'A Holy People, the Redeemed of the Lord'* with royal status. Ruin transformed, iniquity cast aside and forgiven in great love.

It behoves all of us to pray for the peace of Jerusalem - a city which lies at the heart of our story as people of faith. But ultimately what Isaiah is seeking to do is to lead us on a journey – one, which in the original Hebrew is a poem of beauty – reveals the opportunity for restoration of a people isolated from God. It is tender in nature, yet uses its imagery surrounding the Holy City of God.

And perhaps this leads us on to Luke's beautiful account of the Saviour's birth. What the Gospel writer does not give us is a straightforward biography of Jesus. Instead, we have a profound reflection on the life of Jesus, including this wonderful account of his birth, surrounded as it is with angels and the sense of light which seems to me - softy that I am - to flood this birth narrative of the Lord. Luke uses his theological training to lead us on a journey, one which is counter-cultural and world-shaking in nature. We sometimes get too wrapped up in the familiarity of this passage to gain the extraordinary depth of journeying Luke wants us to undertake. With the sense of luminescence which surrounds the account, he wants us to be drawn into allowing God to draw us into the continual knowledge of the Divine Presence within our lives – immersing ourselves within this light.

This baby is no ordinary baby – but the Son of the Most High – the one who gives all people the opportunity, through his life, teaching, death and resurrection, to live lives of resurrection themselves – lives illumined by the Light of Life.

The other thing to remember is how subversive Luke is being! He is turning the power of the human world on its head. He places the birth of Jesus firmly in time and place – a dusty corner of the Emperor Augustus's empire – Caesar Augustus was greatest ruler the world had ever seen at that point. But the understanding of power is turned on its head as the story unfolds towards the moment when shepherds gather around the manger throne.

True power is revealed in Jesus Christ through his self-giving love – and God identifying with every aspect of our human journey.

No wonder all around the world people continue to turn to Christ. Think of the 100 million Chinese now believed to be Christian – a rapidly growing number in the face of the ghastliness of the communist regime. Think of the North Korean Christians who cling to the sign of love revealed by the cross, in spite of the fact that they are likely to be incarcerated in concentration camps or murdered if they proclaim their faith. Yet they do just this, just by displaying this self-giving love which we are all called to reveal. Christians all around the world – living lives rooted in the knowledge of God's gift of love made known in the face of Jesus Christ.

So yes Luke, bless you for leading us to the manger as we hear of:

The heavenly army of angels (and army is the actual Greek word) – who proclaim peace for all humanity through this baby – a mighty host proclaiming peace!

Thank you for leading us with the shepherds, who offer their wonder and curiosity, as well as their status as outcasts – people on the edge of society.

Thank you for revealing that God identifies with all on the edge, when we remember that the inn offered a closed door. There was no openness in Bethlehem, no receptivity, no welcome, no vacancy, but a birth on the margins of David's city, and that the earth offered a manger- a trough- to hold the infant Christ, the Babe of Bethlehem - 'House of Bread' – the one who is the very Bread of Life.

We are all called by Luke the Gospel writer to know, in the face of a world in turmoil because of this pandemic, in a society whose foundations seem to shake - that in the face of Jesus Christ we are given hope beyond all hope, and the knowledge of God's love for each one of us made known within our humanity – in the Word made Flesh.

We are called to open our hearts at the manger bed, bringing all the baggage we bear and laying it aside for healing - knowing that this is truly 'news of great joy for all people,' and that in seeking to reveal this in all that we do, we too may be signs of the incomparable gift of God's love made known in the face of Jesus Christ- life-changing and life-giving.

A very happy and blessed Christmas.



The Virgin with the Sleeping Christ Child, 1610 (Oil on Canvas), by Orazio Gentileschi

**Isaiah 62: 6-end**

Upon your walls, O Jerusalem, I have posted sentinels; all day and all night they shall never be silent. You who remind the Lord, take no rest, and give him no rest until he establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth. The Lord has sworn by his right hand and by his mighty arm: I will not again give your grain to be food for your enemies, and foreigners shall not drink the wine for which you have laboured; but those who garner it shall eat it and praise the Lord, and those who gather it shall drink it in my holy courts.

Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples. The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter

Zion, 'See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him.' They shall be called, 'The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord'; and you shall be called, 'Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken.'

#### Titus 3: 4-7

But when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

#### Luke 2: 8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.