

Midnight Mass 2020

*Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem - words of the first reading from Isaiah; and really they seem to me to be as relevant today as when the prophet wrote them over 2,500 years ago. As this ghastly year moves towards its end, it does certainly sometimes feel that we live in the ruins of life as we knew it before we entered the first lockdown in March. Yet ultimately, Isaiah talks of deep-seated rejoicing even in the face of disaster. Prophesying to his people who had been yoked in slavery within Babylon, he calls them to know that God's abiding presence will lead them towards true freedom; a chance to rebuild the shattered remnants of their nation. *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'**

Peace, good news, salvation.

These three words will have different resonances for us, but at Christmas they are particularly appropriate. We rejoice in the birth of the one who is referred to by Isaiah (9:6) as *Sar Shalom - the Prince of Peace*, and whom Luke portrays as causing the heavenly host angels to proclaim, *'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill among people.'*

Jesus is also the one whose Good News every Christian is called to proclaimed throughout the world. Mark the Evangelist gives us the core proclamation of faith in the opening words of his Gospel: *'The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.'* We might say that that is his birth narrative! The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.... job done. And knowing Jesus not merely good news, but THE good news.

Peace, good news, salvation.

So what of salvation? Well, it is certainly at the heart of the Gospel message. Paul, writing to Titus describes that, *'The grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.'* The word 'salvation' might sound a bit 'church' and unappealing, and for those who perhaps know nothing about the Christian Faith incomprehensible, yet I want to have a shot at explaining what I believe to be its fullest meaning. In knowing, following and growing in Jesus Christ, life is transformed. We are called to look at the world in a new way, and, if we allow God to lead us on a journey, we have the capacity to know that we are never alone; that the deepest joy is open to us no matter what we are experiencing. I am not talking about happiness. That can be ephemeral. I refer to the well-spring of love which dwells in every human heart just waiting to burst forth and flood the parched areas of our lives.

John's Prologue to his Gospel is one of the most extraordinary passages from antiquity. In it, the Gospel writer calls us to journey with him as he explores an inherent aspect of divine love. When he starts by talking of the Word -or Logos- of God, he is speaking of the Wisdom of God – something powerfully represented within the Hebrew Scriptures. As I have said before, we are not to see the Word as representing Jesus – at least not yet. Indeed, John paints an understanding that the Word is something which is open to creation

and humanity. The Word is *the true light that lightens every human being* – so, lightening people of good will throughout the ages in every time and place; philosophers of every age, artists, scientists, doctors, musicians, ordinary women, men and children – all who reach out with goodness – exercising their own creativity to enrich other people's lives and revealing the beauty of God in their own ways. Through this, people are drawn into the life of God in an extraordinary way in doing what they can to make the world a better place. They reveal the light that shines through human history in the face of darkness. This is something we have seen much displayed during this season of pandemic; from the work of doctors and medics including those who have worked towards vaccines, people working in the care sector, to just plain good old-fashioned neighbourliness in the face of enduring separation in the lives of so many.

The display of this connectedness takes us to the heart of our faith. John reveals the knowledge of the fulness of God's love for us in one sentence: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.* That's John's birth narrative of Jesus. The unity of Love which God desires to share with each one of us is made known in the face of Jesus Christ – utterly rooted within our humanity – the same flesh as each of us. Through his life, his passion, death, and resurrection, we are shown how God longs for us to be drawn into lives of self-giving love just as Jesus himself showed. It is from him that we learn how to allow the Wisdom of God to abide and work within our own lives.

Jesus embodies all that we can understand of God within a human life. We see the fulness in the life of one who served others and washed their feet; one who sought out those considered 'lost' to lead them on a journey to find their true selves; the one who challenged people's understanding of how to view other people. ALL are equal. No 'ifs,' no 'buts.' The Church as an institution may sometimes have failed miserably to display this, yet it is fundamental to faith in Jesus Christ. So too is the challenge to corruption and injustice. This wisdom of God is also radically displayed in words of forgiveness from the cross itself.

We seem to be living in tumultuous times; from the ongoing and seemingly never-ending crisis of this pandemic to the challenges of political change around the world and worries over climate change. We are ever more aware of many areas of brokenness within society. We are worried, because we see a world where the innocent and vulnerable seem to fall into the hands of the unscrupulous and manipulative. There is disconnection within society and even within families on a scale never seen before. How can we respond? What can we take away from this service tonight which will enable us to function and - more importantly - to thrive within this topsy-turvy world we inhabit?

Total connection. What we heard in our readings is the absolute confirmation of the identification of God within every facet of our lives in the face of Jesus Christ. We are offered the fulness of life itself. Faith offers the solution to our broken world at this time of disconnection. It is the answer to the stresses and strains within for us and those we interact with. There are no barriers to God's love - none whatsoever. All that is desired is the wish to be led on a journey of expectation and loving our neighbour as our self; seeing in the face of all those we meet people equally loved by God. Sometimes this is difficult, and

we may struggle - yet we are never alone – God is with us on every step of our journey. Living in this way is how we find our true selves.

We come with our flaws, our weaknesses and baggage and are called to know God's abiding presence and healing within our lives – we know Jesus, the true and living bread, The birth of this child represents the start of a life which ultimately transformed broken humanity through self-giving love. Jesus Christ calls you to share in his risen life of transforming the world - the richest journey you can ever make. He offers you true peace, the good news of God's love for you, and the salvation of overwhelming love. My dear friends, seek to follow the one revealed in the manger stall for you in Bethlehem. You will never regret it.

A very happy and blessed Christmas to you.



Elisabetta Sirani, Virgin and Child, 1663 National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C.

Isaiah 52: 7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.' Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Hebrews 1: 1-14

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he 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, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, 'You are my Son; today I have begotten you'? Or again, 'I will be his Father, and he will be my Son'? And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.' Of the angels he says, 'He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.' But of the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever, and the righteous sceptre is the sceptre of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.' And, 'In the beginning, Lord you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end.' But to which of the angels has he ever said, 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet'? Are not all angels spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?

John 1: 1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.