

Sermon for Christmas day 2019. Rev'd Jenny Simson

Fear not! Says the angel to Joseph, to Mary and to the shepherds. It is a recurring theme in the Christmas stories, and a significant reminder that the overwhelming news of God the Saviour's coming is both all that the human heart could hope for and at the same time something that powerfully disrupts the way the world goes and the way our lives go. There is something to be afraid of in the renewal of a world: I may not welcome being reconstructed or interrupted.

With these words Bishop Rowan Williams (previous Archbishop of Canterbury) begins his 2003 Christmas sermon.¹ Fearless or fearful, there is no turning back from what is revealed in the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem as the unbounded love of our God who calls us to himself and births creative freedom which redefines human possibility.

So we may wonder how this all comes about - how does God's love for us in the birth of Jesus reveal itself to us and take us beyond what we can imagine. Well of course it is all part of the mystery of God's love - never to be fathomed by mere mortals, but there are certain events in our scriptures that enable some understanding of the power of God's love for his children. For example in ancient Hebrew times, God was known through the prophets and the great deeds that he had done.

We have heard about the parting of the waters and the freeing of the Hebrews from slavery. We have heard about the prophet Moses and his journey up the mountain to receive from God the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone. These signs and many more speak about God, his ways and his relationship with his people.

The incarnation, the birth of Jesus in the manger however, is very different - there are none of these spectacular outward signs. In John's gospel the prologue simply proclaims, "In the beginning was the Word.....and the word became flesh and dwelt among us."

In Luke's nativity story we hear that some very unlikely people are called to witness the wonder of this event. The lowly shepherds are chosen and told where the birth has taken place. They themselves are lit up in the field where they keep watch over their sheep, by the glory of the Lord that shone all around them. As we can imagine they were terrified, yet the angel assures them there is nothing to fear. And then after a little while, the angel and heavenly host who proclaim the birth, disappear into the night and what is left is simply a babe in a manger. And even though there are no grandiose outward signs comparable to what has gone before in scriptural stories, God does the most amazing thing – he enters the world from the inside of a human life like ours, and things then begin to happen for humanity from the inside. We are gifted the opportunity to learn firsthand about God and about ourselves through his great love for us shown in the humanity of Jesus.

The incarnation says to us clearly that God is no longer a God on the outside looking in –

¹ Bishop Rowan Williams. *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter Sermons in Canterbury Cathedral, Bloomsbury, London, 2013.* p 13.

but an insider expressing ways of love that we are able to identify with and learn from in all areas of our lives. The incarnation delivers to us a much more personal and intimate knowledge and experience of God that promises to take us along on the journey into wholeness. It delivers the possibility of a new unity within ourselves, between each other and between heaven and earth. Only God's love is capable of such a profound event that will continue to be present and provide throughout all time.

So what's to be afraid of? It all sounds perfectly wonderful, masterful and simple.

Well as I'm sure we all know as simple as it is, the complexity of the human condition will need some changes for God's love to be truly accepted, recognised and received and the potential offered to come into fulfilment.

I'm sure we all know that 'change' never comes easily. It's okay when it's happening to someone else or somewhere else, but it is never easy when it affects you and me personally.

Who among us wants to experience the pain of change, to let go of our comfortable ways – who wants to bear the labour pains of new birth. And how can we bear something so painful that many of us are so fearful of.

Well the good news is - God knows we can't bear it on our own. What God promises in the reading from Isaiah today affords us a glimpse of the provision that God makes for us. He promises the personal accompaniment of a wonderful counsellor, who we receive in faith as the Holy Spirit; he promises the sovereignty of a mighty God forever at the helm; he promises the caring ways of an eternal father and the promise of everlasting peace in the prince of peace.

We are ready for the change that begins with the birth of Jesus, for God's love is present in this world moving and changing things all the time. There may be few external signs that we can recognise but God is here with us in many forms – in others around us, in happiness and sorrow and even despair because God has been born into this world through the overflowing love he has for us and the world that he created.

Our part is as simple as the birth in the manger – it is to surrender to God's love and become dependent upon his being always present in our lives.

As Paul writes to Titus in today's reading, *God's grace has been revealed and it has made salvation possible for the whole human race and his grace has taught us what we have to do.*

Like the shepherds we must journey, like the kings from the east who came to pay homage to the baby, we are called to follow the star to new birth as God's children.

Christmas is a most holy time. We are blessed deeply through God's Spirit poured on us richly through Jesus Christ. We are blessed because we are loved, we are known and we are never alone. In that assurance we are offered new birth in him.

This day we celebrate that a child has been born, for us a Son given, wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father, Prince of peace and we shall be called, The holy people, the redeemed of the lord, sought out. Allelulia! The Lord be with you.

