

Sermon for Midnight, Christmas 2020

Happy Christmas!

In spite of everything, we are here.

Do you remember how in March this year, it seemed inconceivable that the Coronavirus would be around for more than a few months?

After that wore off, at about the time that we all began to realise that this was going to be a long haul, the prime minister told us not to worry because he would ensure that Christmas would happen as usual.

In the same way that a number of political predictions about Coronavirus have proved over-optimistic, we find ourselves arriving at Christmas 2020 with virtually no sense of a normal celebration.

But it is Christmas night. Perhaps we feel a little blessed that we are able to be in church at this special time.

Christmas happens, not because the prime minister decides that it will be so.

Back in the summer, Boris was probably actually talking about guaranteeing the way we could celebrate, rather than assuring us that December the 25th would happen.

I imagine he wanted to reassure people that, in the middle of an uncertain, frightening and miserable year, it would be OK because by Christmas; he would be able to ensure that things would be normal enough for us to celebrate...well... “normally”.

Whether or not you think Boris Johnson is doing a good job of leading the country, it is clear that he is actually powerless in the face of the Coronavirus.

And, thankfully, he is also powerless to alter the fact of Christmas.

It feels very different compared to any year we have known. For many people, recognising and responding to the message of Christmas this year will be much harder than before, because things have changed irrevocably for the worse due to the pandemic. For those of us fortunate enough to have escaped personal tragedy or loss, the news this week has ensured that there is no one here tonight that is unaffected by the changes and restrictions. The very fact that we cannot sing together at this service shows how different it all is this year.

What better time than midnight on this particular Christmas Eve to read “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light”?

The middle of the night at the darkest time of our year. Is it any wonder that we feel in need of light?

And in a dark year where even the great news of a vaccine has been swiftly snuffed out by the continuing reality of the emergency; Tier 4 restrictions and if an end is coming, it feels as far off as ever.

I cannot remember a year when there has been a greater feeling of the need for good news.

We have been walking in darkness and we need some light.

Interestingly, these words from the book called Isaiah, which were written over 700 years before Jesus was born, were most immediately intended to encourage the people of Judah that a better leader was on the way in comparison to the rather useless one they had at the time.

Relief would come and a child would be born that would undo all of the errors and bad decisions of the king. The prophecy was initially meant to be short term and it found its fulfilment in the eventual succession of a much better leader who turned the nation back to following God.

What it meant to the people of the time, the people who first heard the prediction that the time of darkness would end...to these people the prophecy meant that God had not abandoned them.

God's people needed a message of hope, and here it was:

"God hasn't forgotten you in this dark time.

There is a bright new time coming.

There will be peace, rejoicing, prosperity and freedom.

And it will start with the birth of a child. God is going to ensure that this child will turn everything around". That is what it says.

It is little wonder that these ancient words echoed with resonance for those Palestinian people whenever in future centuries they faced other dark times (which they did) and when they needed to remember that God had not forgotten them.

And it is little wonder that for us in the Christian age, the idea of light coming through the birth of a child also rings true. It is why this passage is read in carol services and Christmas worship every year.

For people in every age, the proof that God is not as far away as it might seem is that "God with us" is the name that was given to the child of the prophecy. The name Immanuel, which means "God with us" is mentioned a couple of chapters before the passage we read tonight.

And Immanuel is the name also given to the man Jesus, whose birth we remember tonight.

In the birth of Jesus, we recognise a complete turning point in world history.

When Jesus was born, everything changed. "God with us" became a literal truth as God took on human form and lived amongst us.

God has not abandoned us and will not abandon us.

The moment of the birth of Jesus was the moment when Godself arrived in our world.

The way that it happened is very familiar to us and the words of our Gospel reading might be one of the few things this Christmas that feel much the same at in every other Christmas we have known.

Despite the familiarity, try to revisit the story this year. The incredibly humble and distressing circumstances; a squalid outhouse for a travelling couple whose relationship would have been scandalous. God surprises us again. The birth of this child in this way is the start of something completely new.

My favourite part of the story is when the real impact of what has just happened in the Bethlehem stable cannot be contained. The excitement and celebration of Godself coming to earth spilled out of heaven. Those shepherds got the surprise of their lives. The joy could not be contained.

Another surprising way for God's presence with us to be announced.

These are the truths of Christmas that cannot be changed no matter what the British Prime minister promises.

We look back over 2000 years to that moment. Down the centuries, the manner of the celebration of Christmas has actually changed many, many times. I imagine that some of those changes will have been forced by circumstances and that people regretted that it had to happen that way.

The reason for the celebration has not changed, however.

Neither has the good news that God has not abandoned us, no matter how dark we feel our world has become.

I pray that all of us may re-discover the closeness of our God in the person of Jesus this Christmas.

I pray that despite the darkness all around we might find our way to recall, give thanks and celebrate.

Most of all I pray that the living Jesus will be present in each of us in the person of the Holy Spirit and that each one of us will know God with us in a new way this year.

"For a child has been born to us..."

Amen