

GOD WITH US

Nicky Ing - 19th December 2004

Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm: 24; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

At this time of year it is so easy to become entangled in all the 'trappings' of Christmas preparation which have become so much a part of our secular culture. We become involved with planning menus, creating space for family who come to be with us, organising parties, wrapping gifts, often trying to please everybody at the same time and we can become fairly exhausted quite a while before Christmas Day comes to us. Not that any of these things are wrong in themselves! It is wonderful to spend time with our families whom we don't often see, and to see the joy in the eyes of little children...and to sing the hymns and carols which we have known since our childhood. It is all part of the sharing of love which we long to offer and receive from one another, and this in turn is a reflection of the unconditional love which God offers us in giving Jesus to share our humanity. I think what can happen, though, when we get so caught up in all the preparations for the celebration, is that these things can turn our attention away from the greatest gift of all, Jesus, Emmanuel, **God-with-us**.

The readings this morning all suggest to us, in various ways, how important it is for us to take God seriously.....to be careful that we are not so busy focussing on what **we** think is important that we miss the centrality of the Christmas message...the greatest gift that God can ever give to us is in the coming of his son, Jesus.

The first reading, today from Isaiah, is a story in the 8th century before the time of Christ. The setting is the small kingdom of Judah, and the problem is whether the dynasty will survive or not. Ahaz, the king of Judah, is afraid that his two neighbours from the north will destroy the kingdom. The king of Israel and the king of Syria have already invaded Judah but they failed to capture Jerusalem or capture King Ahaz.....instead they have left with a number of captive hostages and anything else they could plunder. Ahaz, fearing that they will attack again, needs to look for help, and so he decides to go to Assyria, a superpower with a very aggressive foreign policy, and ask them to help him wipe out his hostile neighbours. The prophet Isaiah is an advisor to King Ahaz, and he is strongly against what the king intends to do. He argues that power politics with Assyria will not be the answer, and that Ahaz needs to have trust in God. He gives the king a sign: 'Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel'a name which means '**God with us**'. Isaiah tells the king that before the child is out of the nursery, the two hostile kingdoms will have lost their power. In fact, the child's name was Hezekiah...who later became king....and he was **not** the promised Messiah. As the centuries went by, the people were still awaiting the coming of the Messiah..... But at that time, in the history of the people of Judah, King Ahaz refuses to accept the word of the prophet, and Assyria then smashes the coalition of the two kingdoms and leaves Judah untouched, provided it shows its submission by regular tribute. The kingdom of Judah is severely weakened. **Ahaz did not take the promises of God seriously.....and could not trust God enough in that situation, but took it into his own hands.**

The psalm today, a song of praise for the awesome power of God, asks who can possibly respond to such a God; ‘Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord, or who shall stand in his holy place?’ and then answers the question.....’He that has clean hands and a pure heart’. The emphasis is on seeking God, in trust, and turning to him for our strength, in all that we do...Trusting in God, taking God’s promises seriously.

Then St. Paul, in the opening chapter of his letter to the Romans, reflects with pride that he is **‘a slave of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God’**; and he traces God’s faithfulness back through the prophets in holy writings,,,and forward to Jesus.....and he reminds those to whom he is writing that they are **‘Called’**, in other words, that their Christian faith is a gift from God, not their own doing ... He offers them his greeting of **‘grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.’** We certainly know, from all his writings, that St. Paul took God very seriously! A question for us this morning perhaps.....do we realise that **we too** are called.....(and what does this mean for each of us in terms of our own Christian journey? This week could be a good time to consider that prayerfully, as we look back on this past year, and consider what is the call to us for this coming year....do we take God seriously?)

Finally we come to Matthew’s gospel....in which he celebrates Jesus as the ultimate fulfilment of prophecy, the royal child of the house of David, born of a virgin, who will be God-with-us. We meet Joseph, whom Matthew describes as ‘righteous’. He is worried when he discovers Mary’s pregnancy, and considers divorce but doesn’t want to make a public announcement about it because if he were to do so, Mary would have to be stoned to death. So God takes a hand in the situation and sends an angel in a dream...to reassure Joseph that Jesus is the son of God through the Holy Spirit.....that he must **not be afraid**, but take public responsibility for Mary and the child. When Joseph exercises the right to name the holy child, he becomes the legal father...so it is through Joseph that Jesus becomes ‘son of David’. Joseph listens to God, and responds in obedience. So, of course, does Mary.

And we can see how today’s scripture passages are linked, when Matthew refers to the prophecy of Isaiah which we read earlier....’All this happened to fulfil what the Lord had said through the prophet: **‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us’.** Matthew begins and also ends his gospel with this theme...’God is with us’.....Just before ascending to his Father, in Matthew Chapter 28, Jesus gathered his disciples and said to them: **‘Go, then and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you....and remember that I am with you always, to the end of the age.’** So, like Isaiah, and the psalm writer, and Paul, and Joseph, and Mary.....do we take God at his word, and trust in God’s promises for us?

Through these Sundays in Advent, we have lit these four candles....the candles of Hope, of Peace, of Joy, and today’s candle of Love. May God encourage us in these last few days of the Advent Season, as we prepare to welcome Christ and realise in new ways what this means for us. We want to continue in the sharing of these qualities of Jesus, so freely offered to us.

I would like to take this opportunity today, of thanking the people of this community, for all the love and encouragement you have offered to me over these past months...as I prepared for priestly ordination. Thank you for the many ways in which you have brought me hope, and peace, and joy, during this time. You have been such a blessing to me. Thank you too, for your prayers...especially the prayers so many of you have faithfully offered for the healing of my son-in law, Rob, who is undergoing several months of chemotherapy in England at this time. My family and I are so grateful and have been helped hugely in the knowledge that the prayers continue. He still has a long way to go but the tests so far have been encouraging. Thank you. It is often in quiet prayerful support of one another that we can be instruments of God's love and we need to encourage each other in our lives as a community. I thank God for all of you.

My prayer for us today, is that as we prepare for Christ's coming, this week, we will remember to let go of our busyness and our hurriedness, so that we can be present to other people in loving and meaningful ways, and realise that '**being**' is as important as '**doing**'. Jesus didn't have material things to give to people. What he gave most was what mattered to others...his personal presence, gifts of the heart; belief in self, inner healing, peace of mind, compassion, forgiveness, dignity, understanding, and justice. If this loving presence lives on in us, it will be the central focus of our Christmas gift-giving. So, may we become more aware of the power of Christ's presence within each of us, and have the ability to reach out today, and this week, and make a difference in the lives of others.... **because** of this wonderful gift of Love which is given to us that we might share it. We ask these things in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. **AMEN**