

Ruth Martin's Sermon

Midnight Mass 2021, St John the Divine

Well, here we are, the church is open, the organ is playing the choir is singing and against so much that is dismal in our world, this year we are in church and we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Gods son, coming to us as a baby, born amid the chaos of families going to their home towns needing to be counted, born in an unhappy land.

Yesterday in the news was a story of another new-born, an abandoned child who survived, overnight, naked and in a part of Northern India where temperatures plummet to minus 10 degrees. How did she survive? She survived in a field of hay nestled in with a stray dog and her several puppies. A miraculous survival.

Last week in the news was an iconic picture of another baby, this time being handed over to soldiers as parents made a last desperate attempt to save their baby and flee Kabul, as the Taliban had marched in, it was in the news because a baby boy about two months old had been found abandoned after the last airlift to safety, taken in by a kindly stranger, a Kabul taxi driver and now, four months later, amazingly his parents located as refugees in Canada and the baby and family reunited! Another miraculous survival.

If we were here at 11 in the morning instead of 11 at night I suspect some of the children who I have seen here, would be quick to see the similarities in the circumstances of these babies and the circumstances of the birth of Jesus Christ.

Poverty, dirt, chaos, perilous journeys, animals, hay, the helplessness and vulnerability of a baby dependent on others for survival, the kindness of strangers, the fear of occupied forces, the mystery of love, the survival.

As I prepared to speak tonight, thinking of these similarities and of some of the differences between them and the baby whose birth we celebrate tonight two thousand years on, I pondered that cosmic reality of human and divine coming together two thousand years ago and what it means to us now.

For we celebrate more than a baby tonight, we celebrate the incarnation of God, the Word made flesh, Logos it is called, the biblical term for Jesus as 'the Word' of God.

There will be many of us here tonight who have heard that passage from John many times and it might give us a gasp, the mystery and wonder of the human and divine come together in human form, in a baby.

Now the Word of God appears in scripture through the Hebrew Scriptures we call the Old Testament; just think in Genesis, right at the start.

'God said ...Let there be light'

God's creative word, a word-act that brings everything into existence.

Then we have the direct speech of God to the prophets

'the Word of the Lord came to Ezekiel', and 'Jeremiah spoke the word', and the word of the Lord is strongly associated with the Wisdom literature.

But then the Word itself becomes flesh. Not just a clever use of the term, 'Word', not just an idea, but the incarnation of God in human flesh in historical presence. Mysterious yes, challenging yes, supernatural even, yes.

We say later in this service that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we say that Jesus was born of a virgin. A child was born that would change our world. We say that God became human in Jesus Christ, we are an incarnational church.

And whilst today and tomorrow we will feel nourished by our worship on this holy night, we know that the world we live in does not recognise this King born as a baby, as God incarnate.

So what can it mean to us today living our lives?

To go beyond the historical Jesus is to step forward into the mystery of faith in which throughout our lives we will learn, reflect, make mistakes, move forward, yet recognising that we can become rooted in Jesus, individually, because of this wondrous night. Even now the shadow of the cross is there because yet more will be demanded of this baby when he is grown, before we are set free and collectively can build each other up in Christ.

What is the way of Christ? For some it will be experienced as a personal encounter that defines the whole of their life, for others it is learning by doing, and recognising that each of us is made in the image of God, is unique and uniquely valued by God and so we seek to serve. As Gerald Manley Hopkins the poet said
'Christ plays in ten thousand places'.

The idea that we can carry the reality of Christ within ourselves means that when we are feeding and clothing others we are feeding and clothing Christ.

Because we hear from John, to all who received him, who believe in his name, He gives power to become children of God, born of God. We have our opportunity.

Yet we too need to be cared for and loved.

There are huge challenges for those of us who stoop in wonder and awe at the infant in the manger who came into the world, bringing light in the darkness as we now have to play our part bringing life and light whenever we can.

We all need this baby. We need to see hope in chaos and uncertainty, light, in the darkness of loneliness and fear, love when so much is absent.

The pandemic has been enormously challenging for each of us and to Christians and the church. At the height of fear and uncertainty we closed our churches to protect our physical health system, hastily, and it is a relief that we feel able to open them again for us, all people, of our faith, another faith or no faith. That's what this baby does, brings hope to each and every human being, to the abandoned in India to the lost in Afghanistan, to the neglected in this country where isolation and loss of communication had in turn led to loss and damaged relationships.

We no longer take for granted hugging each other or even seeing each other face to face, but we want to hug this baby and see this baby reflected in our own lives.

God's wish is for us to reflect and be the body of Christ in our communities and be a praying community, a worshipping community, a community that reflects carefully on how we should behave and act as well as pray.

And the good news, the glorious news, is the birth of this baby so long ago brings Hope. His kingship we know would be and is based on Peace, not war, Love not hate, Healing not wounding, light not darkness.

All babies fight for the gift of life and the gift of hope, and we see in our world that that is unevenly distributed, and life can be unremittingly hard for babies born in the wrong place, the wrong sex, the wrong colour, the wrong families.

By accepting the incarnation, God made flesh, we are entitled to believe in and work towards a more hopeful world, where God's creation is sanctified and blessed, all creation not just human creation, but one where even an abandoned baby girl in Northern India, a baby boy rescued from the clutches of evil in Kabul,and the dishevelled elderly homeless.....and the fish gasping for life in a polluted river, show us the way.

During Advent we have pleaded Come, Emmanuel Come.

Now we celebrate that He did come, He has come and as we prepare to share the peace and good will, we also now stop in wonder and awe at the majesty of God in the creation of a human baby who changed the world and continues to change us if we can open our hearts to the Word that became flesh, God with us. Amen.