**Christmas Eve 2020**

I’d like to suggest that the simple message of Christmas is that God is here, by which I mean that human life has within its capacity, within its DNA the life of God. For us to know what that means and how it might help I think we’d need to have a thought about what we mean by God and each of us will have our own understanding of that. Clergy tend to talk too much so I’m hesitant to say anymore but perhaps I could suggest that what we might mean by Godmay be something to do with creation, life force the power that made all that has been madethe consciousness and energy that flung the stars into place. Or, maybe, love, that which makes the world go round, as we say that which gives life meaning and value makes it all worth while. Or perhaps God is a set of rules, in the sense of being a container, a benevolent parent who keep us safe but one, too, that has expectations of usinspiring us to become all that we can be. There’ll be as many thoughts about what God is and what we mean by those three letters as there are people at this service tonight but I’d like to suggest that what Christmas says is that whatever we think God is, God is here. That’s what the tableau in front of the altar depicting the nativity scene describes: God is born in human form. God is part of us.

Christ Jesus was in the form of God, a great hymn written in the first century tells us, but he did not cling to equality with God, but rather emptied himself in the form of a servant and being found in human form humbled himself obedient to the point of death, death on a cross. Right from the start God’s statement about being with us is modest, draped in diffidence, respectful and its a humility that he teaches throughout his life - the first shall be last, the greatest shall be least - until he then shows us what it means by giving his life in order to save it. This year has provided many, many wonderful examples of people sacrificing themselves on behalf of others, giving before receiving, serving and in so doing they have lived the life of God within them/

“Unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences they strive their utmost to be healers”. Some of you may have wiled away the long, quiet hours of lock down reading Albert Camus’ *The Plague.* Published in 1947 its a timely commentary on this year of ours, that we’d be forgiven for being glad to see the back of, as it tells the story of a terrible plague sweeping through French Algeria. In it Camus writes of the *undefeated* those who are, as he puts it, while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences they strive their utmost to be healers. I suspect that we’ve all had moments this year where we’ve been far from saintly. Moments when the stress, the worry, the anger, the fear, the frustration at such disruption, such uncertainty has made us less than we would hope. Yet the “here” of ‘God is here’ is just that. It is to that frail, feeble, fragility that he came, that he was born. Perhaps to make good but perhaps, too, simply to join, to understand, to console and in consolation, to encourage. One of the wonderful examples of self sacrifice I heard lately was of a nurse on an ITU ward standing all night by the bed of a man she believed would die simply in order to hold his hand so that he may not die alone. The tale was told by his wife who spoke of the support she’d found from other relatives of Covid 19 patients “unless you’ve lived through that ongoing nightmare of emotions yourself” she said “you can’t help in quite the same way”.

I’d like to suggest that what Christmas offers us is that kind of help. That the force of creation, the power of love, the containing expectant presence has taken a place beside us in whatever the ‘here’ is that we are involved in, whatever ‘here’ yours is. Humbling himself, obedient unto death even death on whatever cross it is that you and I bear in order that though we may be unable to be saints we, too, might refuse to bow down to pestilences and so ourselves strive our utmost in turn to be healers.

God is here in the midst of the undefeated, the still standing, to bring grace and truth to our lives and to our world so that our current state be not our last word but only a phrase, a stanza, a chapter of the final picture. The word has become flesh, full of grace and truth and we have behold his glory shining in a darkness that will not overcome it.

**Christmas Day 2020**

I don’t know if you’ve ever listened to tweet of the day? Its not a highlight’s package from Donald Trump but a programme on Radio 4 broadcast daily at about 5.57 in the morning that choses the song of one bird each day to awaken early listeners and then tell them a little bit about its life. Now, I’m not in the habit of getting up that early but I was awake a few weeks ago to hear the tweet of the Mockingbird and learn a little bit about its life. As you may know the mockingbird is famous for mimicking the call of other birds. It hears the sound that another bird makes and then learns quickly how to make it too. If the Oven bird of Connecticut in North America goes “teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher” then Mockingbird too makes that sound and then if the Yellow Tail starts calling “witchity, witchity, witchity” the Mockingbird will add that call to the one its developing: teacher, teacher, teacher, teacher, witchity, witchity, witchity and then maybe even adds a third call like the Blu-jay [squark, squawk] and so on until it is singing a chorus of sounds that reflect its environment. Its a clever, clever bird, a wonder of nature and yet, it is misnamed. For the mockingbird does not mock the sound of others. It does not mimic to no purpose that which it hears. In fact, instead, it composes its call from those that it hears around it. It connects and blends the sounds that it hears to make a chorus all of its own. Rather than a bird that mocks it is a composer, a creator, a Director of Music conducting a choir in which it alone sings all the parts but through it makes a wonderful music.

On this Christmas day we recall the birth of Jesus the presence of God coming to live among us, live like one of us, live as one of us. Sharing our nature, living our life as much in the mud and smell and danger of the stable in Bethlehem as in the glory, and hope and fellowship of the brave new movement that drew, and excited, great crowds later on. But the life we recall on this day

does not mimic or imitate ours frivolously but rather it is one that resonates with us, echoing our experience, shadowing it in gestures of understanding and in sharing it then seeking to compose, create, fashion something new in us, something that has not yet been seen. The year like the one we’ve just had might make us think that Jesus resonates with us best in the mud and smell and danger of the stable in Bethlehem rather than in the glory and hope and fellowship of the brave new movement. Rather than Christmas or Easter its been a Good Friday kind of a year with crucifixion high on the agenda. Yet perhaps God has been taking our meagre bread and few fish this year and making of it a feast, taking our water and turning it into new wine by hearing our call and blending it with his to make a chorus of approval and achievement: hospitals built in days, vaccines made in months, networks of support, kindness, generosity, love abounding. Perhaps the grand composer has been finding light in amongst our darkness.

I spoke last night about Albert Camus’ *The Plague* a book published in 1947 that’s a timely commentary on this awful year of ours telling as it does the story of a terrible plague sweeping through French Algeria. In it Camus writes of the *undefeated* those who are, as he puts it, “while unable to be saints but refusing to bow down to pestilences they strive their utmost to be healers/“ Being undefeated doesn’t quite sound the same as a victory but good teams still win when they’re playing badly and we’re in the scrap of our lives right now where to be still standing is something to be proud of. Perhaps the resilience that we *have* found, the patience that we *have* shown the forbearance with leaders and neighbours and ourselves that we *have* had tell of the composer’s work in us - his blending of our life with his - as we have refused to bow down to pestilences

and are striving our utmost to be healers.

We’ll need that work still in the days ahead. What this day speaks of is that God is with us and those powers of creativity, determination, fortitude which the life of Jesus tells of, and his birth promises to us, will be essential for our prevailing over *this* pestilence

and those others which this year has told us we still face - racial, social, environmental. Our hope is that the word made flesh, the glory of God, the song of the angels, dwells among us - light shining in our darkness proclaiming a presence which continues to call among us. Be not be afraid. Be not be afraid

https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b0952pgw