

Sunday 2nd December 2018
1st of Advent

Matthew 4.16. 'the people living in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned.'

The above words were spoken by Jesus as the explanation of His Incarnation, His coming to earth as a man. This is the reason for Christmas, 'the reason for the season!'

Christmas and Advent are always a difficult subject to deal with, Firstly because we are so familiar, we think, with it, that we may regard it as old hat. Secondly, to treat it as it is, as something earth shattering, the game changer, the fulcrum on which all of history past, present and future hangs, appears to make it too serious. This becomes more so as our society departs ever more from any respect and awareness of God, never mind belief in God. We find the indication of this in the TV adverts which refer to 'holidays' and 'winter festival.' The over-riding impression seems to be that Christmas is the party season, and has no reference to anything that has gone before or comes after.

This is not how the Bible refers to the Incarnation of the only begotten Son of God who took on flesh and dwelt amongst us. The sense of Holy wonder about what happened at Christmas has decayed so much, even in the Church, that any serious attempt to look at it could bring the accusation that we were being killjoys! Someone might even say that we have lost the meaning of Christmas, 'after all, isn't it all about the children?' Well it's not just about the children, it's about everyone from the youngest to the oldest, indeed it's about the as yet unborn and about those who have died, it's about the eternal purposes of God Himself.

We read in Luke chapter 2 verse 10 that the angels announced to the shepherds, 'good news of great joy that will be for all the people..... A Saviour...' This message did not come in a vacuum. It had the situation of 'all the people' in mind, and it had consequences for, 'all the people.' The angels were not announcing a state visit, but the coming of the King to dwell with His people for a reason and a purpose, and that is the context of Christmas which is being missed.

Think of the story in the parable of the lost boys, the prodigal story of Luke 15. The older brother is angry with the father for throwing a party, but it was not a party for its own sake. It was a party, v 32, because the younger son who had been dead to the family, had returned, and being now alive to the father, there was a future. The party was thrown because there had been a resolution to presence of a living death in the family, and the reviving of a future life of a son in the home. There was a whole history that preceded the party, and a consequence that would follow after the party. The party itself was rightfully an occasion to celebrate because it was good news that a dead situation had changed, and a new future was heralded.

It is the same with the Incarnation, with Christmas. We celebrate it not because it is winter, or a holiday time, but because it marks the end of one terrible condition and

heralds the beginning of all things being made new. Without this context, Christmas is only an excuse for the shops to sell and for all the other stuff that comes with it.

Jesus came for a purpose, not a party. He came to save and remake, not to buy and sell. He came to pour out His life and give us bread and wine, not to get drunk, and Christmas is a time which is to remind us of the purpose of His coming. Jesus did not come for turkey and plum pudding, but to transform believers' lives from a famine to a feast of spiritual and eternal sustenance.

Christmas is a time of rejoicing and joy because Jesus came to deliver us from the past, and to usher in a whole new age and life. That is worth celebrating, and Christmas can and should be a time when Christians are almost beside themselves with joy and rejoicing for what God has done for us in Christ. It is no mistake that the carol, 'Joy to the world,' has a lively and upbeat tune!

Let me use an analogy here. We recently considered the 100th year since the end of the First World War. You may have seen various old clips of film taken on or about the 11th of November 1918. There were clips of whole communities who came out onto the streets to celebrate the end of the conflict and cheer the Allied soldiers on their way. The war had ended, the threats were removed, the killing had stopped, there was peace. These were the reason for the celebration, a change had happened, the war was not going to drag on bringing more misery and death. However it was a celebration for a reason, not just a street party because it was a nice idea! The celebration only happened because what had gone before was ended, and there was hope of a new future. Those parties did not ignore the past, nor did it make the future easy, but it was the past and the prospect of a future which gave rise to the joy. This is how it should be, and can be with Christmas. However, the relevance of the celebration depends on us being aware what has ended and begun because of Christ's coming to earth.

Luke 1 verses 26 to 45 gives us the record of the announcement to Mary that she has been blessed to be the one through whom a special child will be born. This would be no ordinary child, but the child who would be the fulfillment of what was prophesied and modeled by the kingdom and kingship of David.

Luke 1 verses 67 to 75 gives us the record of the utterance of Zechariah once his tongue was unloosed to speak. It is a prophetic utterance which means it is the words of God spoken by Zechariah's lips. This is God's explanation of the Incarnation. The prophecy contained in these verses concerns Christ, while the second part of the prophecy from verse 76 concerns the future ministry not of Jesus, but John the Baptist.

It is important that we see the words used in the prophecy about Jesus and ask questions about what they mean and signify. The first striking feature of the words is that they have a gravity and a sense of foreboding about them. The words used to refer to Jesus ministry as regards the then existing condition of humanity are not words which would cause us to shout out that it's time for a party. Look at the passage, we have the words redeem, salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to

rescue us from the hand of our enemies, to enable us to serve without fear and so on. These are words that relate to bondage, captivity, slavery, threat. Matthew very descriptively refers to this condition as people living in a land of darkness, and under a shadow of death. One of the pictures that comes to mind here is the condemned prisoner sitting in the darkened cell waiting for the dawn and execution. That to me conveys something of being under the shadow of death! Can you imagine that? No dawn, no sun rise, no light, but people shuffling about in gloom and a sort of hopeless vagueness, shadows in a land of shadow!

The other side of the prophecy refers to a changed state where there is salvation, mercy, covenant, that is promise, rescue, and a service which is without fear. Think of the hard service in Egypt, that was fearful service! Then there is the reference to righteousness and holiness. The changes that are described here are colossal, the only way to describe them is to use the words of Matthew 4, it is the difference between darkness and light. The word redeemed is used, the idea of being bought back, a price paid to liberate a slave from fearful and severe bondage. The language also raises the picture of a defeated army being held prisoner by the victors. This is not a benign captivity, but describes a state of being at the mercy of a cruel hoard, torture and execution. The language is strong and terrible.

Zechariah's prophecy is all about one who would come and over-turn this dreadful situation that humanity is in. It is about rescue and rebuilding, about a change of rule and hence a complete change of life and fortune. It's about being liberated from fear to faith, from endless darkness and despair to life and light and a real and grounded hope.

The prophecy is very colourful, but to what does it practically refer? It could be thought to refer to a person who would come like an Old Testament Judge and act in God's anointing and instruction to deliver the Jews from bondage to other nations. This is what had happened before in the history of Israel, so is this prophecy about the removal of the rule of the Romans?

The subsequent ministry of Jesus had nothing of that in its nature. Jesus rather seems to have accepted the Roman rule when he said when asked about paying taxes, that they should render unto Caesar what is his, and to God what is God's! Another consideration is that in every previous deliverance from the hand of other nations, God had raised up ordinary men to do extraordinary service, but this child prophesied about was the Son of God Himself. The deliverance that this man was to accomplish was of a much different order. The Judges delivered Israel from the hand of her physical enemies, Jesus came to deliver us from an enemy, an ultimate enemy, more deadly than any mortal foe. Jesus came to rescue us from the jaws of death, sin and Satan, enemies that are eternal enemies, and beyond any and all of humanity to overcome.

This is why we celebrate Christmas, because it was our D-Day as it were. God had invaded the darkness with overwhelming power such that even though the conflict is not yet passed, the outcome is certain. It is as if since that coming of Christ into the world

we are living between D-Day and VE Day. The conflict is real and costly, but the outcome is certain.

By faith in Christ, the merits of His Cross become ours. He delivers us from death, eternal death, from sin and its wages, from the wrath and vengeance of a holy God, and from ourselves. In the fall, paradise was lost, we fell from grace and were estranged from God. This estrangement was so great that we were spiritually dead to God, and dead bodies cannot give themselves life. We were utterly helpless. And Christ came to rescue us from all of this.

Now someone may object to this statement that we are helpless and point out all the advance we have made over the years in science and technology, and in many others spheres of knowledge. I agree, there have been great advances made over the years, but we do not yet know how much of it really is as good as we now think. Do you remember how delighted we were when plastic was invented? It meant hygiene, cleanliness, all sorts of new things were now possible. What do we find today? Plastic is choking our seas and killing marine life. It is accumulating in our bodies and we don't know the long term consequences of it being in our bodies. For years people have been thinking and working to see if we can find a way of making ourselves live forever. That would sort out heaven and hell wouldn't it! However, it would seem that the way we are going we are going to pollute and climate change ourselves out of existence anyway. On and on we go trying to science ourselves out of one hole, only to dig others.

The tragedy is that God Himself has told us of a solution to our situation. It is Christ, and by the way, when it comes to pollution and climate change and all that, God has told us that there is new heaven and earth coming. The response to this is not to think that we can then do as we want with the world and pollute and use all we want. Responsible care for the world God created was His plan, but this also went wrong when the man God had made caretaker of the earth went wrong!

Jesus came, not only to deliver us from all the bondage and fear, but to introduce a new order of rule and kingdom in the lives of believers, a rule of grace and peace, a rule that leads us to be and grow in righteousness and holiness.

We rejoice and celebrate Christmas for these reasons. We rejoice because a great light has broken into our darkness and into this dark world, and it is all centered in Jesus Christ, God's Son born on earth all those long years ago.

What then will be our response? Firstly to any who do not see what all the fuss is about, it probably indicates that you are still sitting in darkness oblivious to the danger of your condition. The bulk of humanity are in this state. People in this condition realise that things are not as they would like them to be, and many try to do something about it, putting plasters on mortal wounds and hoping that that will be a solution. However, after all these years, we seem to have made little progress with the core condition of humanity, and it is still very much every man for themselves!

If we are believers, then it will do us great good to take some time over the next few weeks to sit down, perhaps with a pen and paper and list what the Bible tells us that Jesus has done for us to deliver us from darkness and the shadow of death. It would be good to likewise write down what the Bible tells us the future is for those who believe. Then, if we have the courage, look at what we have gleaned from the Scriptures and ask ourselves how much of these things true of us. Have we returned to the Shepherd of our souls? Do we have a grounded hope of heaven? Are we changing? Is sin being subdued in our hearts and lives? These are painful questions to ask, and we cannot leave it at that. This exercise of self-examination must lead to prayer, humbling and a thankful turning to God. It helps some people to add visuals to this latter aspect. Light a candle in your darkened room and as the flame expels the darkness, ask God to so shine in our hearts. Perhaps your delight is in music. Why not choose a part of the Messiah, and acknowledge Christ to be your King and submit again to His gracious rule.

If we do this, then perhaps our weary hearts will once again be touched with the awesomeness of Christ born of Mary, the light of the world, and the joy of our hearts.