

Readings for Christmas

25th December 2023

First Reading: Isaiah 52:7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices; together they shout for joy, for in plain sight they see the return of the LORD to Zion. Break forth; shout together for joy, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people; he has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

Second Reading: Hebrews 1:1-4

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Gospel: St Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,^[a] praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

A Reflection for Christmas

Some of you may have come across the books of Gervase Phinn, particularly if you have ever been a teacher. He can, perhaps, best be described as the 'James Herriott' of the education world, and his books tell stories of some of his experiences as a school inspector in Yorkshire. I was reminded of his writing last week when visiting a friend who was about to go to see his 6-year-old grandson in his school nativity play in the role of the innkeeper. It was good to hear of a school actually putting on a nativity play and brought to mind Gervase Phinn's book 'A Wayne in a Manger', a collection of stories specifically about nativity plays he had attended.

In one story, the innkeeper is a particularly grumpy soul, possibly because he hadn't been given the coveted role of Joseph. When Joseph and Mary arrive at the inn on the donkey, he declares that not only is there no room at the inn, but there is no stable either. Joseph protests, pointing out that Mary is having a baby. The innkeeper's reply 'Well I can't help that, it's nowt to do with me!' elicits the response from Joseph 'Its' nowt to do with me neither!'

Nativity plays, although less common these days, are a lovely way of telling the Christmas story for young children. But the Christmas story isn't really a cosy, comfortable story about a lovely baby. Jesus was born in poverty, in a shed for animals – hard, uncomfortable and cold. His country was living under Roman oppression, and his family was forced to flee as refugees shortly after his birth to escape the rage of a puppet king who sought to shore up his position by the genocide of children. If we have been paying any attention to the news at all in recent weeks, it won't be too difficult to recognise that there are many people in this world who could easily identify with the reality of Jesus' early life.

Today, Bethlehem is a town in the Palestinian territories, in the occupied West Bank. It is a place where attacks on Palestinians by Israeli military and settlers have been a constant threat for many years, and such attacks have increased enormously in recent weeks, although, of course, on nothing like the scale of Gaza.

This year, Christmas celebrations have been cancelled in Bethlehem and across the Holy Land, the very place where Jesus was born, the place at the heart of the Christmas story. Most years, many pilgrims visit Bethlehem around Christmas time and, in addition to the church services that mark the birth of our Lord, there are other public festivities and elaborate decorations. But this year, there are no pilgrims. The Holy Land is a place where many are grieving the loss of family members, many are injured, many have lost their homes and livelihoods, and all face an uncertain future.

In November, the Patriarchs and Heads of the Churches in Jerusalem called on their congregations to forego any unnecessary festivities this Christmas and to focus on the spiritual meaning of Christmas, to stand in solidarity with those suffering so much anguish, and to pray for a just and lasting peace.

Our reading from Isaiah, the prophet who told us more than any other about the coming of the Messiah, starts by telling us 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace...' The baby, whose birth is celebrated in our nativity plays, came to bring peace; he was born as Prince of Peace. The angels announced 'Peace on earth'.

My friend who was off to see his grandson as innkeeper in the nativity play told me another anecdote. In a modern twist on the story, the play started with Joseph pacing up and down anxiously while noises off were of a baby being

born. There was a wail and then a child dressed as a doctor rushed onto the stage. 'Congratulations Joseph – it's a God!'

'It's a God!' Many a true word is spoken in jest. For at the heart of the Christmas story is this astonishing fact: that God reached out to fallen humanity by sending his Son. God, born as a tiny, helpless baby.

As our reading from Hebrews says '...in these last days, he has spoken to us by a Son...'. But despite God sending his Son as the ultimate role model, humanity's track record has been marked by too many failures and too few successes. Of course, the road to peace is never easy, but the first step needs to be taken...and then the next. The leaders of the world need the courage to take those steps and they need all our support, and our prayers, in making them. Yes, mistakes will be made along the way. However, God also sent his Son to be our Saviour, a Saviour who loves us and forgives our failures, who enables us to try again, and again.

So this Christmas, amidst our festivities, let us stand with those who suffer, and pray again, and again, as the churches in Jerusalem have requested, for a just and lasting peace. And let us pray for those who have it within their power to help it to happen. For the people of the Holy Land, for the people of Ukraine, for the people of so many other parts of the world, may the song of the angels, 'Peace on earth', become a reality.