

Christmas Eve Sermon: Isaiah 52, 7-10; Hebrews 1 1-4; John 1 1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. The Word was with God, in the beginning. (John 1:1-2)

In this inspired, poetic writing, at the start of John's gospel, a profound theological idea is conveyed to us in a few short phrases. They hide, in their brevity, an astonishing revelation: that a baby born in Bethlehem, is God-made-flesh and come to dwell among us.

Just as in the Genesis narrative, God's Word *speaks the world* into being, so too, in John's gospel, God speaks into creation once more. God's Word, the child born of Mary, shines into the darkness, and from his fullness, we receive God's grace and mercy. He comes as a gift from God, to all who call on his name.

Jesus' birth renews the world, removing the threat of darkness forever, because in him, God reaches out to bring us home. For Jesus, the baby who dwells among us, becomes through our faith, an indwelling in us, that leads to new life.

Jesus, God's Word spoken to the world, begets new words of forgiveness and reconciliation. A gift of peace freely given, that we celebrate tonight, in our communion meal.

God's Word is one of reconciling peace; a *Shalom*, proclaimed by the angels; a share in God's glory, through the glory of the Son, who brings us back into communion with God.

People who attend here regularly, know that we usually celebrate communion on a table in the body of the church. There are good theological reasons for this, because Christianity is an *embodied* faith. Our community of faith forms both the body of Christ and the community that receives Christ in our midst. Preaching God's Word and celebrating communion on a table *amongst the people of God*, commemorates and recalls Jesus' bodily Incarnation in history and celebrates his coming amongst us. Christ lived as one *of us*, and lives *with us* still; he is our Immanuel, our God-with-us.

For most of the year, we live and work in an everyday world. God comes *with us*, into our daily lives, and Sunday by Sunday we celebrate God's gift to us from the ground of our ordinariness. But, at Christmas, we turn our minds to higher things, to journeys and angels and to the unsettling mystery of God, who is *in* the world, but not *of* the world. The Word made flesh has more light, and mystery at this time of year, as heaven breaks into Earth, and reorders it anew.

'The Lord will bring you a sign. A young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel' (Is. 7: 14)

Immanuel is Hebrew name, which means 'God with us.' This verse comes in chapter 7 of the book of Isaiah. A book written to the Jewish people at a time when they were greatly oppressed and despairing. Isaiah's prophetic words speak into their despair, to answer those who wonder where God is; the God who promises to be *with them*

and who makes a covenant that Jerusalem will stand for ever, as a sign of God's rule.

Prophecies in the Bible speak with more than one voice and where Judaism looks to the book of Isaiah as a promise about the restoration of Jerusalem, Christians read an additional meaning into the text: a prophetic revelation that *Christ is* the new Jerusalem; the bodily sign of God's coming salvation. And as Christ's body, the church, we too, are that new Jerusalem.

The baby of Bethlehem is sign of Immanuel, God-with-us; God's spoken word of peace and reconciliation to the world; the restoration of Jerusalem.

'How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces shalom, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Jerusalem, your God reigns.' (Is. 52: 7)

Shalom is a Hebrew word which means a type of wholeness which is inward signifying completeness and outwards, giving something back to the world. It is a generous, loving blessing. This is the peace that Christ brings us at Christmas, one that makes us whole, builds us into a community and encourages us to give back to the world the love which has been freely given to us; an encompassing love, given once, for all people, to build a new community, one that is open to all and excludes none.

For there are no barriers to God's love, no walls, no me-first, no second-class citizens, no people who are in, or out, no exclusions in heaven, only one, single community of faith, under God.

So, as we celebrate God's shalom, let us turn our minds to how we might build that community, the New Jerusalem, the one that reflects God's generous love; a love that accepts all, is open to all and excludes no one.

May God's wholeness and reconciling peace with us, as we give thanks for God's generous Word to the world; given through the baby in Bethlehem, the sign who brings good news, announces salvation and says to Jerusalem, your God reigns.
Amen