

## **Sermon at Midnight Communion Christmas 2017- All Saints Church Wokingham by the Rector, Rev'd Canon David Hodgson.**

“He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being”

This is a remarkable claim to make about anyone. The first followers of Jesus of Nazareth whose birth we celebrate tonight saw him in terms which were vast and cosmic as this opening section of St John's Gospel expresses. In Jesus of Nazareth they saw a fusion of identity – between divine wisdom, power and love, and the life and work of this man. They recognised a presence in Jesus – the presence of God's Spirit which is at the heart of all things. And what is more – and what gives the Christian vision of life its unique character, represented by the symbol of the cross – what they knew about the divine spirit was completely re-shaped by the life-story of this man. Jesus lived in a totally vulnerable way and did not escape a cruel end. He was born in poverty and executed a criminal – and yet they saw in him the radiant light of God's glory.

So, Jesus is seen and trusted as the One in whom the mystery of God and the experience of human life came together. And this faith in Christ transformed over time the human understanding of God and of our own place and destiny in the world. And so in this holy feast of Christmas we celebrate the birth of this Jesus; the Christ, the anointed one, who shows us a human life offered to the mystery of God's love and who shows us the mystery of God's love embodied in human life.

The baby Jesus lying in the humble manger was a sign to the shepherds and is a sign to us: that God's love is not restricted to clean and tidy lives, but comes right into our own all too often messed up lives, searching for where we have wandered, offering the blessings of healing and peace. God's love is standing at the door and knocking, waiting for us to open the door of our own soul wider.

For the first three hundred years after Christ, Christians did not celebrate Christmas – that is they did not have a festival which focussed specifically on the birth of Jesus. They celebrated his baptism when his public ministry began; and they celebrated of course his death and resurrection. And perhaps that was to be expected because in fact celebrating birthdays was not something people were given to anyway in those days of the Roman Empire. Life in the body and on this earth was seen as a burden by many, even a curse, from which they longed for release, so one's birthday, the day of entry into mortal life, was not seen generally as a cause of celebration. I've never seen an adequate explanation as to why exactly the Church decided to celebrate the birthday of Christ. There are lots of theories about why mid-winter in the northern hemisphere was chosen as the time (since we do not know the actual birthday of Jesus) around the idea that the Church wanted to Christianise the pagan solstice festivals. But why did the Church choose to start celebrating the birth of Christ having not done so for 300 years? Perhaps it was because as more people became Christians, more people began to see the value of celebrating their own birthdays. With faith in Jesus who blessed and made divine the human body and the life in this world came a new and positive attitude to being human, and so the beginning of one's life became worth celebrating at its annual anniversary; because the Word became flesh, because Jesus was born of a woman, so birthdays became more popular. And by that means, perhaps, as celebrating birthdays generally became more popular under the influence of a Christian affirmation of life as a gift from God, then the birth of Jesus also came to be seen as a festival not to be ignored. This is pure speculation by the way – but in any case, the fact is that the Church did choose to celebrate specifically the birth of Jesus and now today we find this is the biggest opportunity of the year when Christians celebrate all that God has done for us and for the world through the gift of Jesus.

Just as the celebration of our birthdays in adult life are coloured by the knowledge of what has happened and what may yet happen in that life, also as we celebrate the birth of Jesus we do so with the knowledge of and in the joy of knowing, what was achieved by the whole of what Jesus did.

Jesus proclaimed in his teaching and demonstrated by his actions that God reaches out to embrace and uplift the most vulnerable. Jesus announced his mission picking up the words of his forefather Isaiah as follows:

“The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me;  
he has sent me to announce good news to the poor,  
to proclaim release for prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind;  
to let the broken victims, go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour”

When you look at the mission and message of Jesus it’s as challenging today as ever. Jesus was born to confront and disempower the fears and failures that hold us in bondage and prolong the agonies and miseries of this world.

When the career of Jesus ended in the catastrophe of the crucifixion it could have been the end of him. But by that event in the life of Jesus the mystery of God penetrates the suffering depths of human experience; the experience of finitude and meaninglessness, failure, death and rejection.

And when Jesus was seen to have been raised from death into life in the mystery of God; by that the presence of God active to transform all experiences of human life was able to be believed and proclaimed.

Like other birthdays, Christmas is also a time when we reflect on what has happened in the year gone and what seems likely to be happening in the coming year. It feels to many that the world today is under greater threat and more unstable than it has been for a long time. That sense of opportunity and optimism at the dawn of the new millennium 18 years ago has long been overwhelmed by war upon war, scandal upon scandal, terrorist attack upon terrorist attack; and now it seems there is clear division and disagreement both within countries like ours and the USA, and between the nations, about what future policies and partnerships should be. It feels that as the promises of earlier projects and efforts to bring harmony and well-being appear to have failed, so many have turned back towards separation rather than unity; closing borders rather than opening them; and there is a disillusionment with hope; the hopes of Mary the Mother of our Lord’s song seem as distant today perhaps as they were then: “he has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty”.

And so maybe this year it feels less easy to celebrate at Christmas. How do we celebrate when we know harrowing images of starving children in Yemen are a flick of a screen away from our eyes, and we know that this is no natural disaster but the consequence of political decisions and not only by tyrannical governments.

I believe we can - we must celebrate – even in the face of the difficult and painful realities of the world and our lives; in truth the more difficult the times are the more is the need to rejoice at Christmas, that is to celebrate the birth of Jesus with joy and with hope – because in Jesus the Christ is the true hope and the true light of the world. Without this good news of great joy for all the people that the angel announced to the shepherds, what can we hope in? This is the true source of the hope we need to be motivated and to be energised in order to redouble our faith and commitment in the face of struggle - to do what the Lord requires of us; to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with our God, as the prophet Micah summarised service to the divine Spirit. The love that came to light in Jesus is the lifeline to the future of the world and ourselves. We do well to celebrate with all our hearts the birth of this “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.”

