

Christmas Day 2017 All Saints Nottingham

Sermon preached by Rev Christopher Harrison

2017 has been a year in which much that we see around us, locally as well as nationally and internationally, has been unsettling. Nottingham has not been immune from the general rise in homelessness across many areas of the country; we've seen this in our own area here at All Saints as well as around St Peter's church. Indeed you don't have to be homeless to know that simply living from day to day can be very precarious; so many people one meets seem to have health worries, money problems, family difficulties, or to suffer from the isolation and loneliness which are an increasing epidemic in today's society. Our nation as a whole seems increasingly divided across the generations, between those of different religious and racial backgrounds, and between rich and poor. And then we see a world where the uglier sides of nationalism are on the increase, in which the power of big business and big data seem more and more uncontrollable by national or international authorities, and in which there are always areas of tension which can all too easily erupt into conflict. The powder keg of the Middle East smoulders on, and we watch powerlessly as the human cost of the war in Syria continues to grow, alongside the unending mix of causes which impel people from various parts of Africa and Asia to seek a life in Europe which is safer and more secure financially. Of course there have been some things to celebrate in recent months, however, such as the fact that so-called Islamic State has been forced very much onto the defensive and is arguably no longer the threat that it used to be.

I suppose it's natural at Christmas time to look back on the year which is passed, and of course many people share their personal thoughts and experiences relating to the past months at this time of year. Such reflections can be a reminder of what is good in many people's lives: achievements, occasions of celebration, coupled with a desire to maintain and renew relationships and friendships both nearby and far away. But there are also those for whom the mood at this time of year is different, and more in keeping with the sombre outlook with which I began. Those who have suffered the loss of a close family member, especially those for whom this will be the first Christmas without them; those whose lives are dominated by sickness, infirmity, loneliness, depression, anxiety; those who have had to flee their homes and are separated from their family members through being asylum seekers or refugees; and all those who feel that for whatever reason they simply will not be able to celebrate in the way that everyone else seems to be celebrating (although of course there are many people in such a situation). Such people may well, moreover, feel that they don't have any desire to be involved in all the frenetic rushing around which takes place in the run up to Christmas, with all the buying and

spending which goes on, and they understandably yearn for a simpler and quieter time of peace and rest.

All these reflections, however, can all too easily leave us disheartened and discouraged. But we have so far failed to reflect upon what, for us as Christians, Christmas is really all about. For Christmas is, at its heart, the Mass – the Eucharistic celebration – of Jesus Christ, in whom God was revealed in human form. This is what we call the incarnation; that God's Son, sometimes described as the Word of God, the eternal and cosmic Christ, who was with God the Father – or God the Creator – from the very beginning of time, along with the Holy Spirit – was seen on earth and lived among us. The awe and wonder with which we, along with millions (even billions) of people around the world, greet the Christ child, born in Bethlehem, reflects our deeper awe and wonder at the amazing, astonishing, fact that in Jesus God is with us, Emmanuel, and that the source of all life, meaning, love, and existence has been revealed in a human being.

We may never fully understand how a person can be both divine and human. Let's just accept that this enigma, this paradox, is a way of attempting to describe the infinite love for humanity that streams forth from the Source of all that is, from the heart of existence, in other words from God. But how, you may ask, does this idea of God being with us, God loving the world so much that he sent his only Son, square with all the pain and suffering that we see around us? The answer is not that God will magically wipe away all suffering from the world, or that somehow by just believing in Jesus everything in a believer's life will automatically and instantly get better. The message of the incarnation, rather, is twofold:

- first, that if people live by Jesus' values of love, forgiveness, compassion, mercy, and the particular concern for the weak and vulnerable which he showed in his life here on earth, societies and communities can go a long way towards creating a world in which all people have a chance to flourish. By his teachings and his actions, Jesus showed that in God's eyes each person is important, regardless of the status they may have in the eyes of the world. The challenge he sets us is to find ways of realising that vision, that fundamental principle, in our world, in the face of all those tendencies which would lead us in the opposite direction.
- The second message of the incarnation is that the poison of all those things that separate humanity from God – our selfishness, greed, our destructive and violent tendencies, sin, in other words - has somehow been negated. Sin is still very much there, in all of us, in the world as a whole; but by living on earth, and by dying and rising again for us, Christ has

somehow taken the cosmic consequences of sin upon himself and drawn its sting, so that it will not stand for ever between us and God.

Let us then, in this Christmas season, renew our endeavours to embrace Christ's message of love, forgiveness, reconciliation, and mercy. Let us ask ourselves where in our lives, in our families, in our workplaces, in our church, these eternal values can work their miracles once again; restoring hope to the downcast and broken in spirit, bringing together those who are divided and estranged from one another, and guiding us to bring God's mercy and care to those whose ability to help themselves is limited. This is what Christmas is really all about; this is what the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ can do for us here and now; and so may the blessings of the incarnate Son of God be with you all this Christmas time and in the months to come. Amen.