Christmas Eve – Baby Jesus saves us from alienation and brokenness

Rev’d Peter Balabanski

Christmas Eve 2024

We’re here to reconnect tonight. Some have come a long way to reconnect with family and faith-community – to reconnect with a cherished tradition and sing much-loved carols – maybe even to reconnect with ourselves after the demands and upheavals of a busy year. All this reconnecting happens because God has reached out to us – over and over again – but most completely in the one whose birth we’re here to celebrate tonight; Jesus; Emmanuel; God with us.

The Christ-child, Jesus, is God who has come to be with us. Jesus is the reason for all our journeys to this place. God’s gift of the Christ-child lies behind the spirit we say characterises Christmas-time – a spirit of loving generosity, of hearts opened wide in care and good will, hearts opened wide in hope, and some hearts re-opened to the healing work of grief. What is it about God coming to us in Jesus that can set so much goodness loose? It’s all in the story, so let’s see what Luke’s told us.

Jesus is born in a little province ruled by far-away Rome. Roman imperial rule was all about power, control and taxation. It’s a startling backdrop for tonight’s story; because God comes to be in the world with us as one of Rome’s victims! As Rome is sucking power into itself, God gives power away by coming as a fragile infant. While Rome is busy dividing people to conquer them for its own gain, God comes to be with us in person, to connect with us, and to free us to connect with each other.

Jesus is our way to know God because he is God with us; God who calls us to freedom. The story of his coming begins before his birth. His birth under Roman rule echoes ancient Israel's repeated grief – living under foreign domination, but hoping for God's promised Messiah to come to free them. Luke's story connects Joseph and the pregnant Mary with the town of Bethlehem, whose famous child, the shepherd boy David, had become Israel's most revered king 1,000 years earlier.

Connecting Jesus with David echoes huge expectations. Think of what we just heard in Isaiah 9.[5]*…all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.* [6]*For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;…*[7]*His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness* … It's a prophecy for our time! What a dream! Down-trodden, colonised people all over the world light up with hope at these words. A mighty warrior will lead us to freedom from our oppressors!

But as soon as Luke has raised these tremendous hopes, he seems to dash them, telling us that the baby is born in astoundingly humble circumstances. …*she laid him in a manger because there was no* space/*room in the* room/*inn*. For the royal child that Isaiah expected, it's a hard beginning to swallow. What Luke's saying is that God came to connect with real people living real lives; God showed no interest in royal power, wealth or privilege. Luke underlines this with the angel announcing the birth to some nearby shepherds – not to the lord mayor of Bethlehem; not to high religious officials; but to shepherds! Shepherds were generally regarded as dishonest people because they grazed their flocks on other people's lands. They were prohibited from being judges or witnesses. So God's not fussed with social acceptability either, or even the credibility of the first witnesses to

Jesus' birth.

God has come in Jesus to connect with real people living real lives. God doesn't wait for humanity to get it together and be good or godly. God has come to connect with us regardless. To call us to become ourselves; God's beloved children – people who aren't measured by our success or our wealth or our importance or our social acceptability. Our true selves are measured by our relationships – particularly how we care for the little people that God loves; how we look after each other.

The rescue we heard Isaiah prophesy tonight was read to mean rescue from external enemies – like the Egyptians, the Babylonians and the Romans. The Christmas message is that Jesus has come to rescue us from something deeper; from our reflection of God's image. We're born to reflect clear images of what God is like – the way Jesus does. But that image is incomplete in us. I've heard us described as like jigsaw puzzles with missing pieces or pictures that've been through a shredder.

Jesus was born to help us identify and place the missing pieces of our jigsaw. Jesus is our patient friend who knows what the original of the shredded picture looks like. So he can help us assemble the shredded pieces to be whole. We see what the true picture looks like in his life. He has come to be with us so we can work together and reconnect the bits; the full picture of ourselves, shaped and coloured by his kindness, generosity and shared love. At its heart are the warm colours and lights of care and good will – colours that give hope to this broken world he came to save.

God gave us the baby Jesus to save us from alienation and brokenness – to help us truly reflect the perfect image of God's love for the world. And we reflect that when we humbly and simply give ourselves to him to let him reconnect us with who we are, with each other, and with him, our God. Amen