

In Jesus – God born a child of Earth

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Christmas Eve 2023 – Isa 9 2-7 Ps 96 Titus 2 11-14 Lk 2 1-14

You'd never think so, but the Gospel we've just heard was written by people who'd been through something quite catastrophic. In the year 70 CE the Roman colonial power had responded to a Jewish rebellion by besieging and then utterly destroying Jerusalem, burning the Temple, and killing most of the remaining inhabitants. Luke wrote this hope-filled Gospel only a decade or two later, with Rome still supreme, still controlling its subjects on pain of death – and Emperor Augustus called himself son of God. Where could Luke find reason to hope in such conditions?

Luke looked back past the catastrophe to tell us of a story of extraordinary hope. Luke wanted us all to share in this hope. The birth of Jesus kindled this hope in the shepherds. And our great hope is founded on this child we've just heard was born; this child we've joined with the shepherds and angels to see tonight.

We heard Isaiah say a child was coming – a child who would ultimately bring endless peace. This child's birth would signal the beginning of the end of the oppressors' yoke. The soldiers' boots and their blood-soaked garments would be burned. A just and righteous government would be established, and everyone could hope to live in peace. The psalmist says that even the trees of the forest would sing out for joy because of this child's coming! God knows we need this hope today!

Luke tells us that the child of Mary and Joseph is the one

Isaiah foretold; the one anointed to reveal God's glory, and to bring peace on Earth. What convinced Luke of this was what he saw this child grow up to be and do – Luke had studied the life and ministry of Jesus – and his Gospel goes on to tell us that story.

In Jesus, Luke saw all the love and strength and justice and kindness and goodness of God. In Jesus' life and ministry, and in his death and resurrection, Luke saw God perfectly revealed. Even the subsequent horrors of Jerusalem's sacking and all the ongoing pain of colonial rule couldn't filter out Luke's conviction that the story of Jesus meant ultimate freedom and joy.

How do we hear this story? For us, it's filtered through more than two millennia of romanticism, fanaticism and tradition. So what holy family do we see? Do we see super-humans, especially protected by God? Do we see people who survive this sort of celebrity pressure intact? Do we imagine that they weren't touched by the loneliness of travellers; the vulnerability of travel whilst pregnant – and in a traditional society like theirs, of being unmarried into the bargain.

No, instead we see ordinary, vulnerable people; people like us. God didn't rig things to make his journey towards becoming mortal any easier. The God who came to us in this little baby came already bearing real human burdens; the misery of the colonised, the vulnerability of the traveller, the defencelessness of the newborn; the violation of not being safe in your own Land.

We usually tend to focus on the true humanity and vulnerability of Jesus in the story of his Passion and crucifixion. But we see tonight that it started well before he was born. God's solidarity with the most vulnerable is total. This night, we bear witness to God becoming fully and vulnerably human. It could have been you; it could have been me. That's how strong God's solidarity is with all who need

hope.

When we moved towards (looked at) the crib tonight, who did we think we'd find there? Luke saw in the infant Jesus – in the person he grew up to be, in the things he did and said – Luke saw God calling us to trust him – to become imitators of Jesus; people of hope and justice, people of kindness, peace and love, and in particular for Luke, people of hospitality. From the very beginning, Jesus welcomed people at the bottom of the pile; starting with those shepherds.

Hope, justice, kindness, peace, love and hospitality – these are the gifts which can transform situations of dehumanising misery and danger into places where at least a glimpse of God's love for us brings back hope. And in Jesus – God born a child of Earth – and in imitating Jesus, those gifts can be brought to birth in us. Then we can continue to bring his hope. May this hope be our Christmas message? Amen.