

Sermon Christmas Day 2018

Isaiah 9:2-7 Luke 2:1-14

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus with a festival that has been hijacked by our secular society into something that loses sight of the real meaning of Christmas, we can be excused for asking ourselves, 'What is this really all about?' Now, of course, you being here in this beautiful little church, by definition, have a pretty good idea what this is all about. However, it is not such a bad question to ask in any case. Where do we begin? As with any story in the Bible, it is all about the message. That is what the Bible is, a book of messages from God. The Nativity story has several messages. A good starting point is that it is about God revealing himself to us in the person of Jesus in order that we might have a deeper relationship with him. That is hugely important. Another very important message is one of humble service. Actually, the word *humble* is really superfluous because service is humble. However, for the sake of this sermon, let's stick with it.

Humble elements abound in the Nativity story, from the manger to the shepherds, the first people to receive the good news. They are hardly people of great power, wealth or social standing. They are people just like you and me. I think they actually represent us in the story, but they (we) are hugely important, so important that they have the honour of being told the news before anyone else.

So humble service. So much of what Jesus has to teach us involves service. The commandment, 'to love our neighbour', is really about service. Caring, nurturing, providing for, that is service. The parable of the Good Samaritan really says it all. Not only does it define who our neighbour is, but also how we should treat them.

There is the story of a king who had no one to succeed him. So he invited young people to be interviewed by him, with a view to being his successor. A poverty-stricken young man felt an inner call to apply, but he had nothing to wear for the interview and no money to buy food and clothing for the long journey. He decided to work night and day to earn the needed money. When all was ready, he set out.

One day, after days of hard travel, the young man caught sight of the king's castle on a high hill in the distance. About the same time, he saw a beggar sitting at the side of the road. Shivering and cold, the beggar said in a weak voice, 'Help

me, I>'m dying!'. The young man gave the beggar his good clothes and all the money and provisions he had. Then, with a fearful heart, he continued his journey to the castle in the beggar's clothes and with no money for the return trip home. When the young man appeared before the king, he was shocked. Seated on the throne was the beggar, wearing the clothes he had given him. The beggar turned out to be the king himself.

I don't need to tell you that the king chose the young man to succeed him. What a wise king!

There is no doubt that a relationship with Jesus does bring its challenges. Jesus himself makes no bones about that. When a man told Jesus that he would follow him, but first he would like to say good-bye to his family, Jesus responded, *'Anyone who puts his hand to the plough and then looks back is not fit for the kingdom of heaven'*. Luke 9:62. There is no doubt that in order to have a consummate, unabridged relationship with God, there sacrifices to be made. The rewards are massive, out of this world, pun intended, but there sacrifices. I really think that is why people today are spurning a relationship with God. They want the quick fix, the easy way out. But that is another story.

I want to wrap up by referring to the reading from Isaiah, and specifically the first verse, which reads, *'The people who walk in darkness will see a great light – a light that will shine on all who live in the land where death casts its shadow.'*

So it is hardly surprising that one of the metaphors Jesus uses to describe himself is a light. *'I am the light of the world. If you follow me, you won't be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life.'* John 8:12. I have no doubt that he had the words of Isaiah in mind when he made that statement.

What does light give? In this world where is so much darkness, light gives guidance and direction. Light gives a sense of comfort and security. Yes, that is what Jesus offers us, but also, as his disciples, and that is what we are if we enter into a relationship with him, that is what we are expected, challenged to be for others.

There is the story of a wealthy businessman who was preparing to retire. He called his two sons into his office and told them of his plans.

'Now, you are both good sons and capable young men,' he said. 'I can't decide whom I should put in charge of my business and all my property. So, I have chosen a test for you.' He gave a coin to each son and said, 'Take this coin and buy something that will fill this house.'

Now, the coin he had given each son was of little value and his house was large with many rooms. Each son knew the task would be difficult.

The older son wasted no time. He hurried to the marketplace and began pricing all sorts of bulky materials. He soon decided that the cheapest and bulkiest thing he could buy was straw. So he bought as much straw as his coin would buy and carried great bundles of it into the house. But the straw barely covered half the floors of the house.

The younger son stopped to think about his father's test. He knew that only a most unusual purchase would pass his father's test. When he returned, he carried only a small package. His brother laughed. 'You expect to fill this house with that?' he said, pointing at the small package.

The younger son said nothing. He opened his little package and took out an assortment of candles. He placed one in each room. When he had lit them, the entire house was filled.....with light!

Jesus comes into our world bringing light. He also challenges us to bring light into the darkness of other people's lives.

I think in acknowledging the birth of Jesus and accepting the story of this monumental birth, we must at the same time accept the challenge he brings with him, the challenge to give something of ourselves for the benefit of those less fortunate than ourselves. As we celebrate the birth of arguably the most influential person to have ever lived, let us take ownership of that challenge and let it become a motivation for our own lives.

And as I said at the service last night, let's make it personal. How does this life affect me? Where am I in my relationship with Jesus Christ? Perhaps I haven't really got past first base. Wherever we are, this is as good a time as any to reflect and move forward. Any birth is about new life, new beginnings. The most appropriate way to celebrate this very special birth is to breathe new life into our relationship with Jesus, to give ourselves over to a life that embraces the love, the example, the way of Christ.