

December 24, 2021 - Christmas Eve - Sermon notes

Isaiah 52:7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1:1-12; John 1:1-14

The world into which the baby Jesus was born was governed, as we are told by Luke, by Romans who had conquered the territory and were busy establishing their rule in the distant land of Palestine. The government of Rome had become an Empire with the success of Augustus Caesar in the recent civil war and a kind of peace ruled the land. This was an imposed peace, imposed by the might of the Roman army, not a feeling of peace. Battles were not fought between small factions because of the fear of punishment. This peace was of benefit to land owners and traders because commerce could proceed and so it was a somewhat profitable land in which to operate and the civil courts were quite swift in handing out rulings and those decisions were also enforced by the efficient army. There was indeed peace in the land but not peace in the hearts of the people.

The descendants of Abraham were among the people who had been brought under this government and it was very difficult for some of those descendants to reconcile the message that the Almighty God, not the Roman government, was the true ruler. There was a feeling of unrest among some of the people of Israel and a level of expectation that things should be different. One of the reasons we gather today is to give thanks to God for the birth of Jesus who brought a very different kind of government into being. Peace would rule in his kingdom but this peace wasn't to be

something that was imposed through fear but something that grew out of changed hearts. When the apostle John chose to write his account of the wonder of the Messiah's entrance into the world he chose to describe that entry without referring to the actual physical birth. He wrote with the purpose, as he describes at the end of the book, 'that you may believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.' (John 20:31) He invites his readers to take a look from a different perspective. This version of the Christmas story, chosen for this year's celebration, doesn't include shepherds and angels but they are still around. John's desire was to so present the message of Jesus that those who read his account would also become children of God so let us meditate on his words as we are being invited once again to open our minds and hearts to this message in our own context which has its own challenges and delights. Wherever you find yourself, in whatever situation, I pray that the words which God inspired will fill you with hope, with joy, with true peace, and with God's love.

There are three things that caught my attention as I prayerfully read this passage in preparation for this service. The first was that wonderful line "and the word became flesh and dwelt among us". I was reminded as I studied this verse that it can literally be translated "and the word became flesh and pitched its tent among us". The reference that John made was regarding the Tabernacle - literally the meeting place between God and humanity but my mind went to the tents in Memorial Park. How would it be

if we considered Jesus among those who are pitching their tents to try to find some shelter at least. We know from the other stories that Jesus was, in a sense, homeless on the day of his birth. Jesus being placed in a feed trough in a borrowed stable gave those humble surroundings a dignity that transformed them. Has Jesus pitched his tent among those homeless people in downtown Sudbury? John declares he has, every bit as much as he has pitched his tent among us, in whatever situation we inhabit. The Word can become real for each of us in the depths of our hearts - the centre of our being. Jesus wishes to 'pitch his tent' there - where there may be no room currently - and so we are asked to erect a manger in our hearts for Jesus to be born in us.

The second thing that drew my attention was the verse which says, "to those who believed in his name he gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (v.12/3) It is God's desire for every human being to become a child of God but, unlike in the case of natural birth, we have something to do to become children of God. "To those who believed in his name" is how the promise begins. The kind of belief being referred to his is not just intellectual assent but a transformative kind of belief. I can give intellectual assent to the fact that a ladder will hold me up but unless I actually climb on that ladder I have not expressed the kind of belief indicated here. To believe in Jesus' name is not just an acknowledgment of some historical facts but it is an invitation to a

change in perspective. This change is compared in scripture to the difference between being an orphan who has no rights and being an adopted child with full family rights. It takes, as Jesus later explained to Nicodemus, a kind of second birth. This action is somewhat related to the first thing I noticed - Jesus pitching his tent among us - because making room for this reality to be born in our lives is another description of the kind of belief John describes. The invitation to grow up within God's household is what St. John holds out to his readers and so it is being held out to us. To have the creator of the universe as our Father, the Messiah Jesus as our brother, and the Spirit that unites them as our guide through life is, I would say, a worthwhile target. Moving from intellectual assent into belief simply means beginning to act upon the good news of Jesus Christ.

The third thing that drew my attention was John attesting to the fact that 'we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father full of grace and truth.' (v. 14) The motivation behind this book of Good News was that John, and his companions, actually witnessed something that changed their lives for the better. They had been privileged to see God's glory revealed in and through the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This caused them to re-think many of their previous assumptions about God and humanity and it brought them into conflict with some people but it also brought God's life into the centre of their being. They believed what they saw, what they experienced, as Jesus

pitched his tent in their lives and drew them into the circle of love which is the Trinity of God.

So here we are, in whatever sort of muddle that makes up our personal situation being confronted once again with this old, old, story of Jesus and his love. Within the loneliness that has come about because of the pandemic we can rejoice that Jesus has 'pitched his tent' in our lives. There is such a personal aspect to that statement from John's Gospel - such a series of possibilities. I'm reminded of what Jesus told John to write to the Church in Laodicea as recorded in the book of Revelation. "Behold! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me" (Rev 3:20) Jesus wants to dwell in the very midst of our lives.

Jesus also wishes to have us experience the reality of our adoption - not just from an intellectual standpoint. Belief in Jesus can mean that we enjoy the benefits of being a family member by applying those benefits to our lives. A child of God can boldly bring requests right into the throne room. A child of God has been granted "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" but most of us do not try to learn what that means in practical terms. Our petitions and our outreach work are to be done as children of the Almighty and not as nervous supplicants. We may not yet be mature children but we have Jesus as a brother, God as a Father, and the Spirit as a guide and partner on this journey.

So from the muddle that is our lives the Christ child can

manifest his glory in such ways as to inspire our hearts to continue in devotion.