

## **1 after CHRISTMAS 2023**

**Isaiah 61.10 – 62.3 (Galatians 4.4-7)**

**Luke 2.15 - 21**

Picture the scene – a couple on the road and in a hurry. They are on a long journey, which has been forced on them by the authorities. They are in a hurry because the woman is nine months pregnant, and they have no idea where they will be spending the next night, so they also have no idea if anyone will be around to help with the birth. Eventually they arrive in a town and search for somewhere to sleep. It's very unwelcoming and there is no accommodation available. Panic sets in, but then a friendly soul says he has a stable full of animals and lots of straw. Would that be OK? Full of gratitude they accept the offer, and so just a few hours later a miracle occurs and a healthy boy is born.

Is this a story from 2023, or is it the timeless story of the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem? It is the latter of course, but it could just as easily be something happening on the road in Gaza or in Ukraine, on the choppy water of the sea between Libya and Italy or between France and the UK. What is more, very soon after Jesus was born he and his parents had to flee from the jealousy and insecurity of King Herod, who owed his position courtesy of the occupying Romans, to the relative security of Egypt; so they became genuine refugees and migrants for quite some time until Herod died and the coast was clear for them to return to their home town of Nazareth in Galilee. Otherwise Jesus would almost certainly have been killed by Herod's men.

Does this sound like a comfortable landing on earth for a king, for a Messiah? Far from it. Life was dangerous then, and it is dangerous now, as 2023 has shown us yet again. Jesus knew danger from an early age, and he continued to be acquainted with danger and suffering for the rest of his short human life.

What is also interesting about the arrival of Jesus is who gets to greet him first: shepherds ? There must be some mistake, surely they wouldn't be anything like important enough to feature in this story. Shepherds at that time were almost outcasts, the lowliest of the low, who spent most of their time on mountain sides, minding their sheep; and yet, significantly, they are the ones who are chosen by the angels of God, as we have just heard, not only to be the first to receive the news of the Messiah's birth but are privileged to go and visit him and pay him homage.

The picture is becoming clear, isn't it ? Jesus was born to a poor working family, was born in a stable (of all places) with cattle and sheep mooching around, gets visited by the first century equivalent of rubbish collectors, then by some very grand people from the East (more about them next week), and then finds himself on the run to avoid being slaughtered, through no fault of his own or of his parents. God sends his Son – sends himself – to us here on earth in the most demeaning and dangerous of circumstances, to demonstrate to us that he is with us in all our human situations, to show us in this way that he loves us with a love so inexpressibly powerful, that nothing, not even death itself, can stand in the way of it.

As we step into the new year, we know that our world is a deeply uncertain place. Few of us could have predicted the events of the past few years – Covid, war in Europe, cost of living crisis or even conflict in the Holy Land itself. We do not know what lies ahead in 2024. The love that Jesus was sent to show us is expressed in our solidarity with our sisters and brothers, and with our neighbours, global and local. It is a solidarity that sets people free, ourselves and others. It begins when we come before our loving God in prayer, and it equips us for the walk ahead.

Which brings us to the events of Holy Week and Easter – an even more important part of this story, but we have a bit of time to travel that journey, until the last week of March this coming year. The essence of Christmas, is that the Baby of Bethlehem grew up, became a man, lived

and taught among us – and died for us so that we might have life and have it abundantly, not only today but for evermore.

I wish you a healthy and peaceful 2024.

PBW – 30.12.2023