

Sunday 18 December 2022 – Advent 4

Isaiah 7. 10-16

Matthew 1. 18-end

In a week's time we shall be in the midst of a full-blooded celebration of Christmas, with all the trimmings. After that we shall be back to normal, rather as Christmas trees get chucked out on Boxing Day because they have probably already been in place since the beginning of December. There doesn't seem to be any point in keeping them hanging around. Some of us may of course only put them up a few days before Christmas, so it becomes a pleasure to admire them until Twelfth Night, or even until the end of January.

Today's readings teach us that God (or perhaps the authors of the lectionary) hasn't done with preparation yet. Woven into God's impatience with King Ahaz through Isaiah, because of the former's false modesty, Isaiah unleashes a grumpy exclamation which represents a sign that a young woman will give birth to a boy who shall be called Immanuel. Probably this statement would not attract our attention, as such signs were only sometimes regarded as evidence of God's intentions, but at other times are treated with suspicion. However Matthew directs our attention to what the angel is saying to Joseph who was nervous about Mary being pregnant before they have even lived together, and Matthew also adds the interpretation of the word Emmanuel as meaning: "God with us".

"God with us" – such a simple phrase of just three words, but what a potentially life-changing promise for all Christians, and perhaps for Jews, Muslims and others as well. What do we understand by it ?

Throughout the OT God communicated to us through leaders and prophets, who were either proclaimed for their wisdom or chased out of town for their supposed insulting comments. God always remained faithful to those he had chosen and who knew who he was, whether kings

or ordinary citizens. But they never got to see God. Then suddenly, heralded by prophets such as Isaiah, Daniel and John the Baptist, Jesus arrives in our midst, in the most lowly circumstances, lives for 33 years including 3 years in teaching and healing, raising people from the dead and dying on the cross for us. He himself rises again, and appears many times to his followers, before disappearing physically for ever, but not before promising them the gift of the Holy Spirit. So we come to the God who is with us and within us at all times and in all places, to reassure, guide and protect us as we make our way through our daily lives. We see the faith he instils in people like Ukrainians, defending their freedom to choose their own way forward, and also in those who are in prison or hospital or life-threatening situations. God is with us, and this will be demonstrated once more as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ in one week's time.

I would like to read you a poem called Creation. It was written by Professor Sir Robert Boyd, who is known as the father of space science in this country and whose understanding of physics was matched by a deep faith. He marvels at God's creation and poses the question: Can this God be known? At the end of the poem he reaches his conclusion.

Creation

'In the beginning', long before all worlds
Or flaming stars or whirling galaxies,
Before that first 'big bang', if such it was,
Or earlier contraction: back and back
Beyond all time or co-related space
And all that is and all that ever was
And all that yet will be; Source of the whole,

'In the beginning was the Word' of God....
Who is this God and can this God be known
Within the confines of a human skull,
A litre and a half of mortal brain
Whose interlinking neurons must depend
On chemistry and physics in the end
For all that man can know or comprehend ?
Can man know God eternally enthroned
Throughout all space and in the great beyond ?
The mystery of being, still unsolved
By all our science and philosophy,
Fills me with breathless wonder, and the God
From whom it all continually proceeds
Calls forth my worship and shall worship have.
But love in incarnation draws my soul
To humble adoration of a Babe;
'In this was manifest the love of God.'
Still Jesus comes to those who seek for God
And still he answers as he did of old,
'I've been with you so long, how can you say
"I don't know God, oh show me God today"?'
When you've met me you've seen the eternal God,

Met him as Father too, as he who cares

And loves and longs for people like me.

I am the Christmas message. God has come.'