

Come to God

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Christmas Day, 2013
Revd Rebecca Newland

Isaiah 9.2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2.11-14; Luke 2.1-14

Merry Christmas everyone! What a blessed occasion, as we gather together to remember the birth of Jesus. However I must confess I find the Christmas sermon the most difficult sermon to prepare – and it is not because of all the other things I am preparing at this time of the year, like other sermons, services, present buying and Christmas dinners. I find it difficult because of all the memories of Christmas I have and all the layers and layers of Christmassy stuff that has overlaid those very few passages we have in the bible that tell the story of Jesus birth. Over this very simple story we now have holidays, family get-togethers—joy filled and fraught—Christmas trees—plastic and real—tinsel, baubles, mountains of food and alcohol, plum puddings, brandy sauce, presents, high blood pressure and more credit card debt. We also have grief and sadness as we recall all that we have lost in life and how Christmas reminds us of fractured relationships and what is still so wrong in the world and the church.

Buried beneath all of that is the reason for it all. It is so buried it is almost completely lost. Just recently a television interviewer was walking the streets of Tokyo at Christmas time. Much as in Australia, Christmas shopping is a big commercial success in Japan. The interviewer stopped one young woman on the sidewalk, and asked, “What is the meaning of Christmas?” Laughing, she responded, “I don't know. Is that the day that Jesus died?” There really is some truth in her answer.

With all of the complexity and business, the joy and grief and the fading memory of the Christ story it is so very hard to hear any core truth, any voice that speaks to us in a meaningful way. I'd like to offer one possibility, one idea, that may work for you.

At Christmas we celebrate that God becomes one with us. During Advent and our Christmas preparations we have been getting ready for this coming. We have waited and hoped, prayed and organized. Perhaps we have not done it all as we would like or in as timely a manner but we have been getting ready. And now at Christmas we celebrate that God is truly with us. God has come and will continue to reach into our lives. As we gather around the communion table, as we sing hymns of praise and thanksgiving, we celebrate Immanuel, God with us, eternal love with us. And this love is empowering, strengthening and gives us peace and hope. So we celebrate the coming of incarnate love into our lives and we give thanks that Jesus the light of the world shows us a new way to live. We raise our voices and sing with company of heaven and say Amen.

But there is another voice at this moment. There is another melody playing there in the background—and it is always there. It is a voice that is often buried and ignored or so quiet we cannot hear it through the clamor and business of our daily lives. It is a voice that once heard is often dismissed as a fantasy or an illusion. It is a voice that is reasoned away and scoffed away. It is a voice that is often the most powerful by its seeming absence. Yet it is a voice that simply is and will always be.

If our voices have been raised in prayer saying come Lord, come to us this Christmas, this one voice calls back to us. This is the voice of God who says to all of humanity, all of creation, Come to me. I think this is part of the great invitation to those shepherds in that field so long ago.

According to the story there they are minding their own business—getting the job done, perhaps sitting and talking, discussing the latest Roman edict, maybe planning what they would do the next week. Perhaps they were talking about all that was wrong in their world—the price of meat and wool, the taxes they paid, the religious leaders that were incompetent and corrupt. Maybe they were coping with some life difficulty in their family—a death, an illness, a relationship breakdown. Or maybe they were just looking up at the stars wondering what it all meant.

And then an angel surrounded by the glory of God appeared to them. They were rightly terrified. Who wouldn't be! Yet the voice of God, through the angel, says, “do not be afraid” and offers an invitation. To paraphrase the angel's words, “Come to me. Here I am. I am waiting to welcome you. I am waiting to be one with you. Come to me”. And that is exactly what they did—they went to Bethlehem and found the baby Jesus, the one who had become one with us all in flesh and spirit and they rejoiced. Of course they could have just stayed in the fields or gone back home and discussed the weird thing that had happened to them. Yet they came and they saw.

That same voice of God, that invitation to come is still calling us today. We hear it in many different ways and we can choose to explore it in many different ways. God of course is bigger than any religion, faith, nation, ideology or way of being yet God's voice keeps calling to us, to come and live in the heart of God. This is something we humans have to choose consciously and freely. I think the animals and plants are there already! But we humans seem to have to go through the struggle, the questions, the doubts and fears. We too have to find our voice and make our choice. Yet as we choose to come to God we will find we also are given all we need to make the journey. Like Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and wise men, the first disciples and the saints of the early church as we come to God, God will come to us and meet us with love and joy.

All through the scriptures we hear this voice of God inviting us to come to him.

To the ancient Jewish people God said, “Come, I will be your God and you will be my people”

Through the prophet Isaiah he said, “I have called you by name, you are mine”.

Through the psalmist God declares, “When you call to me, I will be there. I will be with you in trouble and I will rescue and honor you”.

In Proverbs, God says, ‘to you, O people, I call and my cry is to all that live’.

Through the voice of Jesus, God says, “Come to me all you who are heavy laden and I will give you rest.”

In the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, God is still calling, “Let everyone who is thirsty come”.

These verses and many, many, more like them as well are the voice of God calling us to come to him, to be one with her and to dwell in his everlasting Spirit.

Tonight/today we have come to church to give thanks, to praise and to worship. You have come here and it is good. But hear God's voice calling to you now and in the year to come. God reaches out to us across time and space and longs to love and hold. May you find the God of all goodness and love this Christmas season and hear his voice throughout the year leading you into fullness of life, into all goodness, beauty and truth. May you follow where he leads and may his peace and love flow through you to all whom you love.

Merry Christmas everyone—and thanks be to God. Amen.