

Christmas, December 25th, 2024

8.00 Holy Communion

Isaiah 9.2-7, Luke 2.1-14

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

With these words, Luke sets his story at a particular time in history. He also sets it in also in a particular place.

Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

And in the rest of the gospel, there are all sorts of historical allusions that have generally been shown to be reliable as far as they can be checked. But in the words about Quirinius, Luke has set a puzzle that scholars have used up lots of ink discussing, as there seems to be a conflict with other historical sources about when Quirinius was around. Christmas morning is not the time to be discussing these but suffice it to say there are plausible ways of making Luke's account match with others. But for our purposes today, these details aren't terribly important. Luke is a careful historian, and he is writing history – in first century terms certainly, and he sets the events of the nativity and the rest of his gospel in a firm historical framework. This is no once-upon-a-time fairy story of indeterminate time and place, but the recounting of real historical events.

But within both Luke's and Matthews's accounts of the nativity, we see numerous other personal histories that to some extent must have come from eye witnesses – Elizabeth and Zechariah as they welcome their long-awaited son, Mary in her submission and obedience to God's message; the dutiful Joseph supporting his betrothed in very difficult circumstances; the shepherds amazed at their vision of angels, and the Magi on their long trek from the east. And more uncomfortably, the devious and dangerous Herod, his subservient priests and advisors, the horrible histories of the time; and most tragically the murdered children in Bethlehem and their parents. For them all, these events were real, history on a very personal level.

Then there were others, perhaps small children or young adults at the time, for whom this birth was ultimately to transform their lives in the decades that followed – the children who would grow up to be Jesus' followers, those born blind and lame that were to be cured, those in authority who were to wrestle with what to do about the radical preacher from Nazareth. This birth was to change their lives, their histories.

But the gospel accounts are more than history of course. They are also HIS Story, to use a rather hackneyed phrase – the story of God's intervention in the world to bring salvation

to all who follow him. In his account Luke draws the parallel between the conception and birth of the prophet Samuel in the Old Testament, and those of John the Baptist and Jesus – the barren Hannah bearing Samuel in the Old Testament, and the barren Elizabeth bearing John in her old age; the song of rejoicing of Hannah, mirrored by the Magnificat of Mary. Matthew in his account draws parallels between the early life of Jesus and the story of Moses and the exodus – both babies who escaped tyrants – Pharaoh in the Old Testament times, and Herod in Jesus's case. Both tie the birth of Jesus into the Old Testament narrative – the birth accounts into God's story. In Luke and Matthew's gospels we also see this in the genealogies which are rarely read in church – Joseph's in Matthew, Mary's in Luke, where names occur from the stories of the Old Testament, particularly King David and his father Jesse; personal histories used by God to forward his plan of salvation. There is also the quoting of Old Testament texts that are taken to prophecy the birth of Christ (using some exegetical methods that we would find very strange indeed but were quite acceptable at the time). Perhaps most profoundly we see HIS story in the prologue of the gospel of John. The story of the Son of God, with his Father in the beginning, taking human flesh for our sake.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.....The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

But God's story, his story, is told in terms of a vulnerable child, in a time and place that was in political and military turmoil – an old king, kept in place by a powerful emperor becoming increasingly paranoid about plots to oust him and a simmering revolt amongst the Jewish population over the tax burden and religious issues. But in the midst of it all, a baby in a manger. It is a story like no other, and turns the usual concepts of history, the story of the great and powerful, completely on its head.

So, we have history, we have HIS story, but the story doesn't end there and in a real way it has become our story too. We measure our own histories through a succession of Christmas's. It is a time that, for all of us, is loaded with memories of years past, of families and friends, those still will us and those whose lives have ended, of old hopes and expectations for the future; a time of childhood delight and sparkling Christmas trees; a time, to quote Betjeman, of *hideous ties so kindly meant*; a time perhaps of uncomfortable memories of family disagreements and arguments. The time too of the Christmas letter – all the news we want to share about the previous year sent around Christmas. A time to sum up what has happened over the previous few months. And that is entirely fitting as it is a time of endings and new beginnings, of new possibilities for the future.

But Christmas is our story in a rather deeper way as well. The historical story, the histories of those around at the time, all encompassed into God's story, impinge on our lives in a more direct way. In the child in the manger, we are called to see again God entering into our world, with all its uncertainties and tumults; entering into the here and now, bringing the promise of Emmanuel, that God is with us, with all our imperfections, in our joys and our sorrows, just as for those around two thousand years ago. A call perhaps for us, in the first instance, to worship and wonder, to let the historical narrative of the nativity, and of

its cast of characters becomes a reality to us as we ponder the baby in his crib and as we hear again the angel's song.

Over the last few weeks services here at All Saints have often included what is, in my view, the greatest of Advent hymn, O Come, O Come Emmanuel. This is of course based on the Advent Antiphons, words that were used before and after the Magnificat at Evening Prayer over seven days before Christmas. These consist of a wide variety of scriptural phrases, put together into short sentences of praise and supplication, often based on Old Testament passages for example, he is referred to as the branch of Jesse, King David's father. The fourth of these antiphons, set for December 20th, also refers to David and has the Latin title O Clavis David. In its full prose form it reads

O Key of David, O royal Power of Israel, controlling at your will the gate of heaven: come, break down the prison walls of death for those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and lead your captive people into freedom.

As we look and wonder at the babe in the manger, his birth foreshadows the events that were to occur thirty or so years later – his passion and crucifixion. And we are called to follow him - to let our story and God's story become thoroughly intertwined; to come to the Christ child, to offer him ourselves, our souls and bodies, to follow him wherever he leads just as the early disciples did. And although following Jesus may not always be easy, we can walk with him in confidence through this life to the eternal life that he has promised for us beyond the grave. Because through his death and resurrection, Jesus has become the key of David which unlocks the gate of heaven, breaks down the prison walls of death, and brings us from its darkness and shadow to freedom in his glorious light and life. In the paraphrase of the hymn itself

*O come, Thou Key of David, come
And open wide our heavenly home
Make safe the way that leads on high
And close the path to misery*

And thus, this morning, more than ever, it is right to proclaim

*Rejoice, Rejoice, Emmanuel
Has come to thee, O Israel.*