

**Collect, Readings and Sermon for Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> December 2020 at 23.30**

**Collect**

Eternal God,  
who made this most holy night  
to shine with the brightness of your one true light:  
bring us, who have known the revelation of that light on earth,  
to see the radiance of your heavenly glory;  
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and for ever.  
Amen.

**Isaiah 9:2-7**

The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.  
You have multiplied the nation,  
you have increased its joy;  
they rejoice before you  
as with joy at the harvest,  
as people exult when dividing plunder.  
For the yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders,  
the rod of their oppressor,  
you have broken as on the day of Midian.  
For all the boots of the tramping warriors  
and all the garments rolled in blood  
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.  
For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders;  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
His authority shall grow continually,  
and there shall be endless peace  
for the throne of David and his kingdom.  
He will establish and uphold it  
with justice and with righteousness  
from this time onwards and for evermore.  
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

## **John 1:1-14**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

## Sermon

I want you to cast your minds back to March, just after the Prime Minister addressed the nation and asked us all to stay at home for the foreseeable future. Do you remember that in the early days of that first lockdown, there was anxiety in some of the more remote parts of the country that people would hop into their camper vans and head for largely uninhabited places. Thankfully it seems that the fear was not realised – rural parts were not overrun. Yet I wonder whether you can relate to that sense of wanting to run away. I remember doing the thought experiment myself at one point: where could I go that would allow me to lead a normal life, away from lockdown, social distancing and isolation? And, as soon as I started to think about escape, I realised that in a global pandemic, there really is nowhere to run and hide.

Tonight, as we celebrate the first Christmas service of the year, we are faced perhaps more powerfully than ever with the most extraordinary truth. That while there are times that we might feel the urge to run away, to escape from some of the challenges that life can bring, God does the exact opposite. God chooses to step right in. To be right here. To join us and engage with whatever messiness – in beautiful and less beautiful ways – life has to offer. The message of Christmas is of God's desire to be with us, come what may.

And the message of Christmas is also about the difference that Jesus makes. In the gospel reading, we heard that familiar, beautifully poetic opening to John's gospel in which Jesus is described as the Word; the light; and God.

When I prepare people for confirmation, one of the activities that I enjoy the most is when we talk about Jesus, and try to identify important aspects of who he was and is. We will talk about things that Jesus did. He was undoubtedly a teacher and a preacher. The scriptures tell us that he healed people, which some would say makes him a miracle worker. In his teaching, Jesus didn't accept the status quo. He challenged social norms, turning people's expectations on their heads. Some would say that this makes him a revolutionary.

We will also discuss Jesus's deeper identity. While Jesus himself never claimed to be God, he did use the term "son of Man" and spoke intimately to God, as his Father, using the term Abba, which is really more like "Daddy." John the Baptist, the forerunner to Jesus, believed that he himself was preparing the way for the one who would baptise with the Holy Spirit. And Christians recognise Jesus as the Anointed One or Messiah, as well as Saviour.

The reason I especially enjoy these conversations about Jesus is that they open all of our hearts and minds. They are conversations that expand rather than closing down discussion because they are not about whether we have the right answer or can guess what the Vicar is thinking, but instead they invite participants to share ideas and experiences, listening to one another and reflecting on all that is being said. They are a reminder that none of us has a monopoly on God. Just as different friends and members of our family might value different aspects of our characters, so we may each value and identify with different aspects of Jesus's identity. And by listening to one another, our understandings can be enriched.

I wonder whether this year each of us might have just a slightly different perspective on the significance of Jesus. When things have seemed dark, I wonder where you have found those glimpses of light? Where you might have seen the face of Christ in those you have encountered.

I expect that many of us are looking towards the New Year with a desperate hope to put 2020 behind us. But perhaps, in the middle of all the challenges and heartache, there are things that we need to hold on to as well. Those glimpses of God that might just help us to recall the real meaning of Christmas, and that we carry into the year ahead.

Do you remember, for example, what it was like in March to find that those people who were classified as key workers included some of the least well paid and most overlooked? Jesus always had an eye towards those on the margins; those who were not powerful. I wonder whether there are lessons we need to take into the coming year. How we will ensure that our vision does not become clouded by the human tendency to see value in the wrong places?

I wonder, too, how social distancing and lockdown has affected your relationships with other people. Many of us have experienced significant loneliness and isolation. Will we remember how we have craved human company; human touch? Will we hold on to the ways we have seen the face of Christ in those people who have found ways to maintain contact and communication with us, even when it has been difficult?

In the days leading up to Christmas, many of us open our Advent calendars, one door a day – sometimes revealing a picture, and sometimes a chocolate. Here in church, we light a new candle each week to mark the season of preparation and waiting. I have heard it said that this year we have had an exceptionally long Advent – we have been in a season of waiting since somewhere around March. And, given the constantly evolving situation, it may be that you don't feel ever so much more prepared than usual.

Yet here tonight, we celebrate because Jesus does come to us. God is present with us. There is light in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it.

So a very Merry Christmas to you all. And, whatever the New Year brings, we can all be assured of God's presence among us, holding us firm and true, this night and always.

Amen