

## ASSURANCE, PROMISE AND HOPE

The Christmas story is one of the most fascinating stories of world history. The gospel writers tell us this story with vivid details describing the sights, the sounds and the excitement surrounding those events. As we read, hear and picture it, we are drawn into the story. However, familiarity breeds apathy doesn't it? We have heard the details all so often that it can easily flush over us without us recognizing the life transforming message that it carries. This evening let us look again and listen anew as I share with you three thoughts from that story.

First, let us listen to John. In the prologue to his gospel he writes these amazing words – “The Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14). The Word was God. The Word was eternal. The Word was the one through whom all creation came into being. And now, John says, the Word has become flesh.

My dear friends, we live in times when there is great disillusionment with humanness. The news regularly depicts horrific atrocities that human beings commit against each other. Our peers are cruel, our friends betray us. There seems to be no mercy or compassion around. Each man for himself seems to be the motto of life today. Aren't you tempted to withdraw from all human relationships? Don't you want to cling on to your pets – your dogs and your cats – at least they won't hurt us, they won't betray us. Hollywood captures this mood beautifully doesn't it? In a world robbed of good human role models, Hollywood tells us that we can only turn to aliens, witches, wizards and werewolves – anything non human – it is they and not human beings who speak truth, who display courage, who exhibit true compassion.

We also live in a consumerist society. Who we are, is not good enough anymore. We have to have that car or phone, we have to be with that kind of people, we have to possess that skill for us to be recognized as important. In this society, human beings are treated like commodities – to be used and discarded when its usefulness is over. But how often do we believe this about ourselves as well? As we grow older, as we realize that we cannot do the things that we used to, we feel sub human. We see ourselves as a burden on others. What is the use of living like this? It is much better to die, we say.

It is in times like this that we hear anew John's words – “The Word became flesh”. When God became Man he makes a great statement. Humanness is valuable. Humanness is important, it has meaning and significance. The great eastern religions of this world tell us that salvation is to be found when we liberate ourselves from our humanness. They say our humanness only binds us, enslaves us and brings us down. However, the Incarnation shows us that God values humanness. God has become human himself. God has not abandoned the human project. He has embraced it into his own self. If humanness is good for God the Creator, it is good for us, his creatures. You and I are of value to God, we are priceless in His eyes, we are not a burden to him. There is meaning and significance in who we are and not in what we have or do. God has become flesh so that we know that great truth. What a blessed assurance, what freedom!

Secondly, let us turn to the gospel of Matthew. The angel of the Lord appears to Mary to tell her that the prophecy of Isaiah will soon be fulfilled – the child that is in her will be called Immanuel, which means “God with us” (Mat. 1:23). Matthew prefixes this incident by describing the situation that they were in – Exile. Indeed, the birth of the Christ child marks the end of their exile (Mat. 1:17).

Now, the Israelites were in exile because of their sin. Having been fashioned into a nation by God they had rebelled against him and found themselves kicked out of their homeland. But we also know that while their own sin *caused* their exile, it is the sin of others – the sins of Empire (violence, oppression and deception) – that *kept* them in exile. Exile is a time of alienation. It is a time when we feel that God is angry with us or that he has abandoned us or that he has forgotten us. It is a time when we are harassed and exploited at every given turn but feel helpless to change ourselves or our situations.

My dear friends, we live in a society like that. We live in times when the rich grow richer and the poor keeps getting poorer despite all the efforts of the “poverty alleviation” programmes. We live in a society where people who are skilled and capable to do good work are deprived of many opportunities simply because they were born into a family which didn’t speak English well. We live in a city which complains vociferously about being held up for a few hours before a concert while staying absolutely silent about the hundreds of men and women who languish in prison for years without any charge. It is to them – the forgotten, the marginalized, the abandoned – that the words of the angel are spoken directly – he is Immanuel, God is with them. And so must we.

Exile and alienation is also very personal. It can come because of our own sin. You may be the one who is addicted to pornography. As the images flash before your eyes you know that what you really crave for is intimacy and you know that the pleasure that you get from those images are only temporary. But the pull is so strong and you feel helpless. Remember that God is with you. He is present not to condemn you. He is with you in your struggle. Exile can also come because of our life circumstances. You may feel alienated that you cannot celebrate Christmas with the rest of the Church because you are a new Christian living in a family which opposes Christ. Remember God is with you. You may have lost a loved one this year and don’t feel like celebrating. Don’t worry, remember God is with you.

What a wonderful promise. When we feel harassed and helpless because of our own sin, our circumstances or the sin embedded in our society we can still hold on to that great promise embedded in the Christmas story – He is Immanuel – God with us.

Finally, let us turn to the gospel of Luke. The angel of the Lord appears to shepherds in the field and announces that the Saviour has been born. And then he gives them a sign – “you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger” (Lk 2:12). What kind of sign is that? Can you imagine it? The Jewish Messiah, The Saviour of the World, The Lord of the Universe is found and revealed in a baby! And this is a normal baby. It is not the romanticized baby who doesn’t cry as the carol tells us. It is not the baby who suddenly gets up and blesses and preaches to the visiting Magi as some of the paintings of the Middle Ages portray. This is a normal baby – totally vulnerable and dependent. A baby who cries for his mother’s milk. A baby who soils his nappies because he has no control of his bladder. A baby who gives his parents many sleepless nights. A baby who will crawl and fall down repeatedly as he struggles to walk and climb. God in Jesus is revealed in the frailty, vulnerability and dependence of that baby. This is a profound mystery.

But as the rest of the gospel reveals, this is precisely the place where he calls us all to experience the true Jesus. My dear friends, those who work among the disabled and handicapped tell us that there is rarely any pretense or vanity in them. They don’t wear masks and in their brutal honesty they force us to be honest about ourselves. Similarly, the Scriptures remind us that if we truly want to experience Jesus as Saviour and Lord we must first be willing to be honest about ourselves. The place where our true selves are shown – in that vulnerability, in that feeling of absolute dependence – is the place where we truly experience the grace of God. It is the meek and the poor in spirit that are truly blessed (Mt 5:3ff). It is the tax collector who recognizes his own sin and hurls himself at the mercy of God who goes home justified (Lk 18:9ff). “Unless... you become like little children you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:3) says Jesus.

This glorious hope is available to you and me – to the real you and to the real me. It is available to us when we admit that the jokes that we crack and the smiling pictures that we upload on Facebook sometimes act as masks behind which we hide our loneliness? It is available to us when we recognize that often we try to satisfy our own hopes, dreams and disappointments through our children? It is available to us when we see that the things that we often criticize about others are the very things that we struggle with ourselves? It is available to us when we realize that our choices and lifestyles are so deeply influenced by what our neighbours do and say? Do you see these tendencies within you?

This Christmas let me invite you to be honest, to strip off those masks and get real about who you really are. Don’t hide behind things which only enslave you. God wants to meet the real you. He wants to transform you by his love and grace. He is the true Saviour, the true Lord. He is able and willing to make you whole.

Oh! What a blessed assurance. What a wonderful promise. What a glorious hope. Rejoice everyone. The Lord has come. Hallelujah!

Amen.