

## Christmas Eve

## Unto us

*Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14*

In the current edition of our Church Magazine, I noted that the last time there was a Christmas Eve Sunday was 2017, when I was away; and the time before that was 2014. So much of the focus is on the birth in the stable, the night-time hours, the shepherds in the cold dark fields, the angels in the star-pocked skies.

What was happening on Christmas Eve morning? Was the (unmentioned in the nativity story) donkey weary of the long road it had undertaken from Nazareth in the north to Bethlehem in the south, a journey of several days? Was footsore Joseph going from place to place looking for a room?

Were the shepherds laying up stocks for a cold evening, moving their sheep into safer places?

How far away were the Wise Men in their travelling? What was King Herod up to in one of his several fortresses in ancient Palestine?

Was the innkeeper (also not mentioned in the gospels) turning away more and more desperate people looking for a room in census-packed Bethlehem?

Were the angels having a last choir practice before their big moment?

Were the swaddling cloths to hand? Was the manger filled with straw? Had Mary's waters broken that morning and was she already in labour?

There was a lot going on during Christmas Eve in the morning for us to think about.

But on the way, gift of God in Mary's womb, ready to be placed in the manger after the traumas and terrors of childbirth, was Jesus, waiting to appear to the world.

From the Old Testament 8th BC Isaiah's prophecy, borrowed by Handel for his 1741 oratorio Messiah: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace."

Unto us. Unto. It's an Old English word, still in use, which means to or towards somebody or something. We read it a lot in the Bible, and it's found in everyday usage too. "He was a law unto himself."

Unto us a Son is born. God's Son, Jesus comes to us, comes towards us. There is movement from God to the earth, God to Creation, God to humanity. The dynamic of God is a forward movement towards us – Unto us...

The star, the angels, the wise men, the shepherds, Mary and Joseph – moving, travelling, journeying. And when, through weariness, or sleepiness, or awestruck, or natural order, they stop, God continues the process, coming forward, stepping forward, Unto us. Not waiting, not holding back, not hiding, but towards us. Unto us.

Unto us – out of the deep darkness, the light of God. So that, at last, we can see. The mess we're in, the shortcomings of our world, it's politics and economics and mishandling of the environmental crisis. Unto us – light. Coming round again and again and again. Do we see the light, and do we see what we are meant to do with ourselves and our world now that the light has come? The symbolism was stark to the Jewish exiles who first read Isaiah. In their captivity, their deep darkness, the light came unto them. To see there was hope, but to see that they had to do something in response to it. It hasn't changed since then.

Only three nights ago was the longest night of the year, the deep darkness of the winter solstice. "Even if we did not know that the celebration of Christmas probably evolved from a pre-Christian

solstice celebration, we could recognize that the theme of light triumphing over darkness resonates with our midwinter longings in a ... fundamentally human way. Our Christmas poetry and hymnody capitalize on the associations provided by elements of the natural world: the dark, cold, uncertainty, and fear of a long winter night being overcome by the light, warmth and hope of new life and the promise of God's presence among us."i Unto us – the light – hope – freedom. Not a passively received gift, but an actively to be seized opportunity to see what needs done and to do it. Dynamic, movement, action, unto us.

The Christmas story tells us that God's chosen people, the faithful of the time, just like the faithful of today, weren't ready, weren't interested, weren't looking for the coming of God. Weighed down by fear, or envy, or despair, or resignation, or too much work, or not enough work, or all the things that really don't matter at this time of year. Are we really ready? For the light, for the freedom for the peace, which will come when we not only accept it but work for it.

In the not-much-read Letter to Titus, not one of the tinsel-bedecked readings associated with this time of year, we find the writer concerned about the focus, ordering and practices of the early Christian Church. Here is insight about how God's coming to earth in the form of Jesus, incarnation, affects our lives today. The starting point is grace. Grace is something we can never get but only be given. In the birth of the Christ-Child we see grace in human form. Grace, in Jesus, given unto us. That we can be lifted up, find ourselves being lifted up, help us lift ourselves up. Titus reminds us that when God comes unto us, in Jesus, our response must be ethical. We make changes in our lives, turning away from things that don't matter to things that do. "A myriad of things vies for our attention and devotion: good looks, social status, worldly success, money, intellect, politics, patriotism, even morality. We fall into idolatry every time there is something

more important in our lives than God... Christianity becomes distorted whenever it is seen as a code of conduct apart from grace."<sup>ii</sup>

When God in Jesus comes, change is coming, and continuing to come, to us and to our world. Jesus comes to be with us, to be with you, because you matter. Jesus is not just God, He is human. He takes on the flesh of a weak, fragile, clumsy, vulnerable baby. What that is saying is that human beings matter. You matter to God. Not just now, but forever. Jesus came to be with us in time so that we might come to be with God in eternity. This great to-ing and fro-ing between heaven and humanity. Unto us.

God is saying, in all the movement and busyness, in all the stillness and loneliness, in all the emptiness and the ringing fullness of Christmas Eve, 'Receive Me as you receive this tiny child. Allow Me to dismantle centuries of enmity, heal decades of hurt, transform depths of antagonism. Be mesmerized by Me the way you're captivated by a tiny baby. Let Me melt your heart. So effortlessly."<sup>iii</sup>

This Christmas Eve God in Jesus is coming, unto us. Christmas means God shows up, shows up where children lose their parents in war. Shows up where parents lose their children in disaster. Shows up where you face the fear of diagnosis, the agony of a relationship break-up, the humiliation of the food bank. Shows up where plans are destroyed, futures stolen, trust betrayed...That's the wonder at the heart of (this Christmas Eve)."<sup>iv</sup> God shows up where laughter is heard. Shows up where unexpected good news is shared. Shows up where gifts are exchanged and gratitude expressed. Shows up in readings and songs, that form part of our services. Shows up when strangers sit beside us in Church. That's the wonder at the heart of this Christmas Eve coming toward us.

We respond to that wonder with gratitude and a renewed sense of purpose. That sense of purpose can be encompassed in one simple question that we should ask of ourselves: 'Where should I show up?' We look at suffering and pain and loneliness in the world and in our lives and ask, 'Where should I be showing up? However useless I feel, however little I can do to make a real difference. At whose side do I truly belong?' My guess is you already know. Some person or situation over these next few days, when for some things slow down, and you knock on the door, or pick up the phone, or send that email.

Unto us. Coming towards us. Jesus is coming to you. Where, in this season of Christmas, do you need to go with Him?

**In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit**

**Amen**

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<sup>i</sup> Linda Lee Clader, *Feasting on the Gospel, Year B, Vol 1, p99*

<sup>ii</sup> Cathy F Young, *ibid, p112*

<sup>iii</sup> Samuel Wells, *The Moment of Truth, p23*

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid p26*