

Bishop of Coventry Christmas Sermon 2022

A Sermon preached in Coventry Cathedral

Readings: Isaiah 52.7-10; John 1.1-14

Introduction

‘It’s getting lighter’, a colleague always says to me at the darkest point of the year. On the evening of 21st December – the shortest day and longest night – she says, ‘The light is coming. Nothing can stop the light coming: second by second the days will get longer and the nights shorter’.

In the bleak mid-Winter, Spring is on its way: imperceptibly at first but truly, certainly.

Multiple crises, including war

It’s been feeling like a very bleak mid-Winter this year. A new word has been coined for the times – *permacrisis*. We’re living a permanent state of chaos and crisis.

- The Covid crisis lingers on and hangs over us like a bad dream.
- The cost-of-living crisis is hitting us all, some much more than others, and it’s hard.
- In the background is the ever-present environmental crisis threatening the planet.
- And now the crisis of war in Europe: war raging in Ukraine – the whole land plunged into an ever deeper darkness.

We have a Ukrainian family living with us at the moment. They come from Bucha where terrible atrocities were committed by occupying Russian forces. We'd hoped to give them a safe, snug, well-fed British Christmas but they've chosen to be closer to home. After reuniting briefly with their father, the children are staying with family in the Netherlands, while their mother, Natasha, has returned to Ukraine with her husband, their father. They're taking generators to Kiev and Bucha to bring light to their land that sits in darkness, its power stations destroyed.

Christmas: the coming of the Light

That's what Christmas is all about: light coming into darkness. The ancient prophecy says, 'The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light – for a child has been born for us, a son given to us; and his name shall be – Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace'.

God comes to our world in Jesus Christ: a world living in darkness and the shadow of death not only to **bring light** – the light of truth, of goodness, of justice, or peace – God comes to **be light**.

'In the beginning', the first book of the Bible tells us, God said, 'Let there be light', and there was light.

In the last book of the Bible, the prophet looks ahead to that great day at the end of time when the earth will be the home of God. and says: no longer will we need a lamp among or even the light of the sun, for God will be our light.

God is the Source of light, and God, the Light Source comes at Christmas – God comes silently, humbly, almost imperceptibly – but come to our world God does, truly and certainly. And God comes as the Light.

John's gospel puts in majestically in its cosmic picture of the beginning of all things: through God's Word – the Word that is God – life comes to the world. In God's word is life and this life is the light of the world – a light shining in the darkness, that the darkness cannot overcome.

And then John's gospel focusses it down to one local moment in the history of one of the world's villages: 'And the word became flesh and lived among us'.

That's why the child who was born on Christmas day said later as an adult: 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life'.

That's the living reality that preserved Terry Waite during his four years as a hostage in Lebanon, much of it shackled to a radiator. His cell had almost no exposure to natural light apart from there was a slither of light creeping through the shutters covering the windows, "Gradually", he recalls, 'that light illuminated that room and I used to say to myself, "Don't give up, remember light is stronger than darkness" and somehow I was able to maintain hope in that situation."

Hope – Light – Peace

That is the hope that comes to the world at Christmas. God has come. The Source of Light who gave light and life to the world in the creation, comes inside the world, beginning in the womb of Mary, and then filling every life that turns to the light, with light and life.

And God comes as the prophet said, as the Prince of Peace.

The ancient people of Israel had a glimpse of that in the time of their defeat by the mighty Babylonian empire, and the exile of most of their people to the city of Babylon. Jerusalem, the holy city, lay in ruins. Think Mariupol in Ukraine: most of its citizens had fled, its once fine buildings razed to the ground, its infrastructure devastated.

Then the news that the exile was over! God had freed his people from captivity. War was over. Messengers were sent back to Jerusalem to prepare the people for peace and prosperity:

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger
who announces peace,
who brings good news, who announces salvation,
who says to Zion,
“Your God reigns”, as we heard earlier.

The light of God is the light of peace – without that light there can be no peace. The darkness that envelopes the

world comes when we turn away from the ways of God's peace.

God has come at Christmas to bring us peace:

- Peace with God: maybe you – I – need to make peace with God today. God has made peace with us in Jesus.
- Peace with each other: maybe you – I – need to make peace with someone in your family or among your friends today. God has come in Jesus to reconcile us, one with another.
- Peace with our enemies.

Our hearts go out to the people of Ukraine this Christmas, and to other places of war and conflict – and mine goes as well to the forgotten Armenian people of Nagorno Karabakh whose life-line to Armenia from their enclave in Azerbaijan has been cut off, and they risk extinction.

Conclusion

I know from our Ukrainian friends in Ukraine and from other friends in Armenia, that despite the darkness enveloping their lands they will still celebrate with deep Christian joy in their hearts the coming of the light of God in Jesus Christ at Christmas, filled with faith and hope. Just like they did in Coventry in 1940, a few weeks after the devastation of city and destruction of the cathedral in war-time bombing.

In fact, yesterday Natasha, our Ukrainian guest, wrote to me saying,

‘Please remember us in your prayers. This Christmas is different for us: no special dinner, no nicely wrapped gifts, no Christmas tree; only prayers and reflection on how God Himself came into this world in flesh’.

And a few minutes later I received this Christmas greeting from Myroslav Marynovych, a former Ukrainian Soviet dissident, who visited the Cathedral recently:

‘We’re writing to you from a country that will have a sad Christmas this year – and we’re not listing the obvious reasons for that. Instead, we await the immutable miracle of Christmas, which transforms dark caves and shelters into caves of God’s love and lights up, instead of destroyed electricity grids, the light of the Bethlehem star. Your love and solidarity will fuel our hope that the day will come when the Lord says to evil: “That’s enough!” And we, in turn, will pray for you so that the warmth in your homes does not disappear, so that the New Year brings such a long-awaited just peace to the whole world!’

Dear friends, a poem have been on my mind this Advent. It’s about the despotic King Herod, ‘raging still from his dark tower’ – the Herod who tried to extinguish the light of the Christ child, and failed. The poem speaks of ‘the lambs slaughtered by men of power’, and it ends:

But every Herod dies, and comes to stand alone
Before the Lamb upon the throne.

Whatever Herod comes to taunt and threaten you in this coming year, and whenever you feel yourself plunging into darkness, know that the Prince of Peace is stronger and that his light is more powerful than the darkness, for Jesus Christ is the light of the world, a light no darkness can overcome.