

Sunday 25th December 2011 Grahamstown Cathedral 7.30 & 9.30 a.m.		CHRISTMAS DAY
Isaiah 52:7-10	Ps 98	Hebrews 1:1-12
		John 1:1-14
THE WORD BECAME FLESH		

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory....” (Jn 1:14a)

I want to begin by wishing a very happy and blessed Christmas to you and your families! It is good to be here, to gather for worship on this Christmas Day. We are here from all over – locals, visitors - and we are all here together around the baby Jesus, with Mary and Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, some sheep; and, being Grahamstown, there is probably at least one donkey which has wandered in off the street.

1st Point – A world that needs to be rescued

What is Christmas? For many, it is holidays, the festive season, a time for parties and family get-togethers; it is a good meal on Christmas day; it is the Christmas lights, decorations in the shops, Christmas carols. But of course at the heart of all this, the reason for the season, is the birth of Jesus Christ, God with us, the Word made flesh. We celebrate the coming of God amongst us in the form of a human being. We celebrate God’s rescue of a broken, hurting world, a world that God loves, a world that God made.

Some years ago a group of us were hiking in the mountains above Kalk Bay, in Cape Town. There are caves, and paths, and some quite dangerous bits. We came round a corner and there was a desperate father whose daughter had fallen down into a cave; she was hurt, and stuck, and couldn’t climb out. We had some food and water and could lower it down to her; we were able to phone the mountain rescue team, and could guide them to where the girl was; eventually the rescue party arrived, with a stretcher and ropes and all the

equipment; they hoisted her out of the cave and into the waiting helicopter and off to False Bay hospital. A week later, with the girl out of hospital, we all gathered together to celebrate the rescue, and to give thanks for the gift of life.

That is what we are doing today. We are celebrating a rescue and giving thanks for the gift of life.

We live in a mixed up, confused and hurting world: a world made by God, a world that God loves; but a world that has gone quite badly wrong, a world that is damaged, a world which, like that young girl, has fallen into a deep dark hole out of which it is unable to climb. As much as we try to change things, improve things, there is this default mechanism that pushes us off course, again and again. A country is liberated from oppression and tyranny; within a few years the liberators, those who fought for their freedom, are themselves the oppressors. We see the effect of hatred and violence around us, and we are appalled by it; yet, if we are honest, we recognise the seeds of that hatred and violence in our own hearts. We long to live lives of peace and love; we find that we react with anger and aggression when others cross us or disagree with us. As Tom Wright puts it:

“[We] have been so seriously damaged by evil that what [we] need is not simply better self-knowledge, or better social conditions, but help, rescue, from outside [our]selves.”¹

And at the same time as we recognise just how badly our world has been damaged by evil, how far off course we have gone, we also hear within ourselves those things that are like echoes of another voice, that call us to a new world: the longing for justice; the quest for spirituality; the hunger for relationships; the delight in beauty.

It is into this damaged yet wonderful world, into our lives, that God sent his Son to be born as our saviour, to rescue us and to bring us

¹ *Simply Christian*, SPCK 2006, 22.

back into relationship with him – like those mountain climbers that lowered the stretcher down to rescue the girl out of the cave.

2nd Point – A new relationship

Our God is the God of relationship. He created the world, and everything in it, including you and me, to be in relationship with him. We are made to know God and to love God. It is when we are walking with God that we are on the right track, that we begin to escape from that deep dark cave into which we have fallen.

We see something of this God of relationship in our Gospel reading: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” (Jn 1:1). “The Word” that is referred to is Jesus Christ. From the beginning, from before the world began, before creation, Jesus the Son co-existed with the Father, in relationship. At Christmas, we celebrate the rescue because the Son was born into our world. “The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory...” (Jn 1:14).

With the birth of Jesus the Son, God the Father invites us into relationship with Him. Like those mountain climbers who reached out to the girl in the cave, God reaches out to us through Jesus. “To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...” (Jn 1:12).

3rd Point – Receive, believe, trust, follow

Receive Christ, believe in his name, trust and follow, as we come to the end of 2011. For some, this year has been wonderful: a family wedding, the birth of a child, things going well at work, academic achievement. We may have started a new job, or moved into a new home, a place we can call our own. For others, the year has been painful: the death of a loved one; the loss of a job; retirement, family struggles. We may have been the victim of crime.

On a national and global level, there has been the Arab spring, which saw people rising up against oppressive regimes and toppling a number of dictators; there has been the cost of that change with loss of life in Libya and Syria in particular; the efforts made at the UN Climate Change Conference to safeguard our environment and our future; there has been the passing by parliament of the Protection of State Information Bill, which for many points to a return to the dark censorship days of apartheid SA, and an attempt by our government to cover up mismanagement, corruption and abuse of power; there has been ongoing persecution of the Anglican Church in Zimbabwe. Christmas is a time when we are reminded to hope, not to despair, because “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it.”

Receive, believe, trust, follow, as we look into 2012 – a year that will see the 200th anniversary of the founding of Grahamstown, and the 100th anniversary of the founding of the ANC; a year in which there will be ongoing struggles for service delivery and adequate administration here in Makana; a year of economic uncertainty for many; a year during which you and I will be called to play our part in the life and witness of our Cathedral community, or wherever we worship; another year of school or university – knowing that in the time ahead, the light of Christ will shine in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it. Receive, believe, trust, follow.

CONCLUSION

We thank God for the great gift of his love shown to us in the birth of his Son Jesus Christ. May the love of Christ live in us and in all that we do, today and in the year ahead.