

Tuesday 25th December 2012 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		

The prayer for Madiba, written by Archbishop Thabo Makgoba:

At Advent we sing and pray, O come, O come Emmanuel.
 We ask now, for Emmanuel, God with us, to be with Madiba and Me Graca.
 Come Emmanuel and release our Madiba from the scourge of ill health;
 Come Emmanuel and offer Madiba everlasting healing;
 You are a God who knows vulnerability, weakness and frailty,
 You are Lord of Lords, King of Kings, Lord of life and death,
 Your power sustains us in life and death.

May your arms of love, stretched wide on the cross for us,
 Now enfold Madiba, and Graca, with compassion, comfort and the
 conviction that you will never forsake them but that you will grant Madiba
 eternal healing and relief from pain and suffering.
 And may your blessing rest upon Madiba now and always.
 Through Jesus Christ your only Son our Lord. Amen.

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

I want to begin by wishing you all a very happy and blessed Christmas. It is always so good to be together at Christmas. Whether you are a local, staying at home over December, or whether you are a visitor, may God bless you and us all as we worship today.

Christmas can be a lonely time as well, so let’s be doubly aware of those around us – those worshipping with us, and those we see or meet.

But wherever we come from, we are 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.

We celebrate what God has done

The feast of Christmas is a celebration of what God has done – the gift of His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus is the reason for the season. The baby born is both the child of Mary, and the Son of God. His name is Emmanuel, which means “God with us” – a sign that God is indeed with us. He is God incarnate – God in the flesh, God amongst us, the light that has come into our dark world.

A few evenings ago we as a family watched again the film *Invictus* – the story of the SA rugby victory over the All Blacks in 1995. It portrays the quality of leadership of Nelson Mandela, and of Francois Pienaar, that led to a great victory – not only over the All Blacks, but a victory over the fear and division and suspicion and hatred of those days. After the game, in the film, Madiba says to Pienaar, “Thank you for what you have done for our country.” And Pienaar replies, “Mr President, thank you for what *you* have done for our country.”

There have been many great rugby games, many great victories. On one level *Invictus* is a story of a rugby match and all the effort and hard work that went into it. So why do we constantly remember it, refer to it?

We remember it because on another level that rugby victory was something much, much bigger than a rugby match: it became a story of the birth of a new country, the journey of reconciliation, the remarkable story of forgiveness – and it continues to move and inspire us, years later.

In the same way, at Christmas, on one level we celebrate the birth of a baby, this child born of Mary, with all the struggle and joy and delight associated with a birth, the gift of this child – a very human experience, something we treasure and remember.

But on another level, in the birth of Jesus we celebrate and remember something so much bigger: this birth says to us that God is with us, that God is amongst us, that God is in our world through his Son.

The birth of Jesus promises new life, new beginnings, new hope for us all. The birth of Jesus is the coming of God amongst us in the form of a human being; God's rescue of a broken, hurting world; light in our darkness.

This birth, this child born, was and is God's power in the world, to save and restore and set free and bring new life.

God comes to save us

Our readings make no bones about the significance of who Jesus, born today, was and is.

With the birth of Jesus, the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled:

“How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the herald, the bringer of good news, who announces peace, who proclaims the salvation [the deliverance] of God.” (Is 52:7, 10)

Jesus comes to bring us the salvation of God.

The Letter to the Hebrews, our 2nd reading, tells of how God has spoken through the prophets, and

“in this the final age God has spoken to us in his Son” (Heb 1:2).

Jesus Christ is

“the radiance of God's glory, the stamp of God's very being, [who] sustains the universe by his word of power.” (Heb 1:3)

In our Gospel reading from St John, we don't have the well-known story of the shepherds, the angels, the wise men, the baby born in the

stable. Instead, we are taken back to the beginning of the universe, the beginning of time, outside of time:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things came into being through him.” (Jn 1:1,3).

It is this creative, all-powerful Word through whom all things were made, that was born as a baby, born a human being:

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

Many will argue and point to so much that is happening around us, so much that has gone horribly, sadly wrong, as a sign of God who is absent, God who does not care, God who is powerless. Some have this picture of God as having started the world off and then washing his hands of it: “a frightfully brilliant academic who published his great work of genius long ago and is now in retirement”¹; or God as a watchmaker, who put together this complex universe, got it going – and then walked away. A God who is inaccessible, out of touch, distant, remote.

But the birth of Jesus says to us that God is with us, that God is profoundly involved in the life of the world, in our lives. He comes to be part of the messiness and imperfections; he is born into the harsh realities of the world.

The Christmas celebration is the story of something that happened over 2000 years ago – and Jesus continues to be born in our hearts and lives today; God continues to be involved in the world. The life and power of God through Jesus, the love of God poured out through His Son, continues to be our guiding reality, our source of truth and life. God continues to transform and to heal and to make new. In the words from our Gospel reading:

¹ Rowan Williams, *Tokens of Trust*, 34

“To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...” (1n 1:12)

Let’s receive him as our redeemer, believe in him as our Lord, trust and follow him as our Saviour.

God with us

And so...

God is with us to transform our lives with his love and power. Jesus, born today, a baby, a child who had to grow and learn, and so God is with us in our struggles, when we are weak, when we trip and fall and have to pick ourselves up again; when we depend on others.

Jesus born today grew up as a boy and young man, and so God is with all our young people, with the heartaches and joys and discoveries that our young people face.

Jesus, born today, called together and led his group of disciples, and so God is with us in our leadership, as we carry responsibility, in our organisations, at school, at work, in our families.

Jesus is amongst us, and with all who grieve the dreadful primary school shootings that took place last week in the USA. Jesus wept at the tomb of his friend. God is with us in our times of greatest sadness and tragedy, when things go so horribly wrong, as well as in our times of greatest joy.

Speaking about those dreadful killings, and the arguments around gun control, Archbishop Rowan Williams said, “If all you have is a hammer, it is sometimes said, everything looks like a nail. If all you have is a gun, everything looks like a target.... If all you have is the child’s willingness and openness to be loved, everything looks like a promise. Control of the arms trade is a start. But what will really make the difference is dealing with fear and the pressure to release

our anxiety and tension at the expense of others. A new heart, a new spirit, as the Bible says, so that peace on earth won't be an empty hope."²

We receive, believe, trust and follow so that we may have a new heart, the new spirit of Christ within us.

Jesus born today is with us on the roads, during these weeks of death and destruction. Let's drive legally and safely.

Jesus born today is with us in the ups and downs of our country, in the aftermath of the Mangaung conference, with its impact on our national life; in the aftermath of Marikana, and De Doorns, and as we hope and pray for those in authority to govern with wisdom and compassion. Jesus was born in a stable, not a palace. His birth is a call to simplicity of life-style, sharing what we have, to move away from the ostentation of extreme wealth. It is on that basis that we question the use of state resources to upgrade the president's home at Nkandla.

Jesus is with us, amongst us, in our work for justice and peace. God is with our fellow Anglicans in the diocese of Harare, Zimbabwe, as they celebrate the return of their churches, rectories, schools, orphanages, their Cathedral – after five years of exile.

Jesus is amongst the people of Israel and Palestine, the land of the Bible and of the birth of Christ, as they continue to seek a way forward that will bring peace.

Jesus born today called tax collectors to repentance. God is with us as we seek to engage with the municipality and local government around service delivery. Many in our community are desperate for adequate housing, proper water and sanitation.

² BBC Radio 4 *Thought for the Day*, 22nd December 2012

Jesus born today is with us as we continue to pray for Tata Madiba and Me Graca Machel.

Jesus born today is with us in the life of our church and diocese as we seek to resource the church in the Eastern Cape for its mission; as we mark the 160th anniversary of this Cathedral and diocese in 2013.

Jesus is amongst us as the Prince of Peace is born, as God comes into our tumultuous, hurting world.

CONCLUSION

God is with us. Let's receive him as our redeemer, believe in him as our Lord, trust and follow him as our Saviour, this gift of God, so that we may be Christ-bearers, carriers of Christ.

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.