

SERMON PREACHED AS SJH MIDNIGHT MASS 11.30 pm MONDAY 24 DECEMBER 2018

SET III READINGS

Well done for coming to church tonight! Churchgoing is less customary than it used to be. An elderly worshipper in the church where I was a curate spoke of standing room only at Midnight Mass in years gone by. I think he was going back to the 1950s.

Many things go to make up Christmas. There are ancient traditions of pagan origin like kissing under the mistletoe, connected with a midwinter festival. There are more recent traditions like giving presents, having a Christmas tree and serving turkey. The church celebrates and proclaims the birth of the Son of God into the human race. For many people, the quickest way into feelings of Christmas is through carols. Our best known carols are based on the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, though they sometimes embroider the story. We don't actually know if the baby awoke when the cattle were lowing. Some Christmas songs don't have much religion in them: 'We wish you a merry Christmas' is an example. It mentions good tidings, but doesn't say what they are. And frequently, when I ask youngsters what their favourite carol is, they reply, "Jingle Bells."

There is lots of material in the gospels, in what are called the birth narratives, to inspire the writing of carols. Angels from heaven, shepherds in the fields and magi from the east, are rich subject matter. It's a wonderful story. It's a story of hardship (Mary and Joseph's circumstances) with a happy ending (the birth of a special baby). The trouble is, that's where many people leave it, whereas the birth is not in fact an ending.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke contain the birth narratives, Matthew focusing on the magi and Luke on the shepherds. Tonight we heard from S. John: not about the details of Jesus' birth, but about what was going on in a much broader sense. 'In the beginning was the Word...'. This concept of the Word comes from the Old Testament. The word of the LORD came to prophets. The word of the LORD was powerful, accomplishing God's will on earth. It did not return to God having failed to do what it was sent to do. You may recall the account of creation in the opening chapter of the book of Genesis: God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. God said, "Let the earth bring forth living creatures,..." and it was so. There was sometimes a reluctance to suggest that God who is holy could be directly involved with a world where there is evil, so God's involvement with the world was often described as him sending his word. His word was his presence in the world. S. John says that this has actually happened in the person of Jesus. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. This thought is echoed by the writer to the Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son,...

So Jesus is God's word, his message to the world, his expression of himself. Are we listening? What are we going to do about it? John says that what has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. Life and light have everyday meanings, but something more is meant here. It is the life behind our ordinary living and biological functioning. It is the reason for our existence. It is the light which shows us the true nature of things, of ourselves in particular, and gives us glimpses of something beyond our comprehension: glimpses of God. It is the light of goodness, contrasted with the darkness of evil.

The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

We are invited to receive this life and walk in this light. If we do so, we shall become children of God: we shall become what Christ is. He entered this world, became what we are, so that we might become what he is. His birth is not an end, but the beginning of our life as God's children.

The best of our carols relate the blessings of Jesus' birth to the needs of the world today: a world as much in need of salvation now as it was 2,000 years ago. One of tonight's communion hymns observes that

...man, at war with man, hears not / the love-song which they bring:

O hush the noise, ye men of strife / and hear the angels sing.

If only some of our earthly powers today heeded that message: God's love-song!

The other communion hymn reminds us that Christ can be born in each of us:

No ear may hear his coming; / but in this world of sin,

where meek souls will receive him, still / the dear Christ enters in.

This Christmas, in all our varied ways of celebrating, may we be open to Christ coming into our lives and the life of the world he was born to save!