

**ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH
CHRISTMAS DAY
SATURDAY 25 DECEMBER 2010
Rev. Anneke Oppewal
Psalm 97; Luke 2: 1 - 14**



“Contrasts, Contrasts”

There is a marked contrast between the terms in which Psalm 97 speaks about God and the way Luke 2 speaks about God. And I would like to suggest that, if we had not been blunted by years of exposure to the Christmas story, we would, at first instance, probably feel more at home with the terminology used in Psalm 97 than that of Luke 2.

We like God to be big, don't we? Almighty and most High, tucked away somewhere in a far away heaven, benignly keeping watch over earth's proceedings. Only very rarely coming down to intervene in our, human, affairs. We like to portray God as the keeper of decency and ethical conduct. A God who loves the righteous and judges the evil. A God loving but awesome and conveniently distant. A God who punishes the bad and rewards the good, but for the rest lets earth run itself. Some sugar uncle we can visit when we feel like it and on whom we can call on whenever we are in trouble.

In the words of Psalm 97: “The King of all the earth, whose throne is built on righteousness and justice, whom the earth sees and trembles, before whom mountains melt like wax.....”

Why then have we all got so attached to the story of Luke 2, the story of God taking the flesh of ordinary humanity in all its fragility? A story that is really, when one looks at it more closely, a very unsettling story where our image of God is concerned. Or, it should be, anyway.

According to Luke and all the other gospels, God became a man, a very normal, vulnerable, fragile human being like us. He who lived life as God would want us all to live and paid with a horrific death for doing so. He lived a life of righteousness and justice, healing and love, in a world full of injustice, violence and pain. In him the gospels say, God himself came to earth, to live with his people, to live the life of his people, to become one with them.

Luke tells it like this: The mother, a young girl not even married, his father not her husband to be. Born in a cattle shed for want of better accommodation. The first visitors a bunch of ruffians straight from the fields outside Bethlehem. An unwanted outcast from the beginning.

You may want to have a look at the Icon where the whole conundrum is laid out perfectly. The gold, the towering mountains, reaching up to heaven, the light coming down from above, splitting the rocks and bringing light where there is darkness. They all speak of the God of Psalm 97, of the King of heaven who can make those mountains shake, who comes down with thunder and lightning from above, who deserves to be worshipped with gold, frankincense and myrrh.

But right in the middle of all that splendour and power we see a mother with her back to her baby, protecting the mouth of a cave. The baby in a manger, with the ox and the donkey peeping over the edge. When we look closer we realise this manger may not be a manger at all. That it looks more like an altar, the baby not a baby but a man, bound for sacrifice with the burial linens of death. Has the ox, an important animal of choice for sacrifice in those days, been moved aside to make room? The

donkey reminds us of that entry into Jerusalem later on, where the King of Peace rides to his death. The cave itself looks as much like a tomb as a stable. The gaping wound of darkness giving way to the light of birth, of a new life, of a new creation.

At the centre of the Icon we find the mystery of Christmas spelled out in imagery that speaks of more than birth and glad tidings: It speaks of death and resurrection, of the light coming down from heaven piercing through the darkness of the world, a new creation rising from the insides of the earth. And around it the shepherds play, the angels sing and kings come with haste to see the miracle.

We want to ask Luke why? Why begin your story with this vulnerable and naked baby in need of nurture and nursing, a child with no status and no defense. Why would God, if he wanted to be part of human life at all, want to start life like that? Isn't that an enormous gamble when you are King of the Universe? To entrust yourself to human hands, human beings? And in an environment that is not very advantageous for such an undertaking to begin with? To make yourself dependent on a young girl and her husband? On the goodwill of an inn keeper and the friendliness of shepherds? Isn't that taking things a bit far? Surely he could have done with a little bit more security, a little bit more comfort, a little bit more of a decent start in life?

I think that is exactly the point Luke is making: That somehow in Christ the unbelievable happened. That we find God so involved with us that he goes the whole way in sharing our existence, at its worst and at its best. It is that story Luke tells, of the Almighty come down, of the King of the Universe in a manger, of angels seeking out shepherds instead of the mighty rulers that reigned the day. With the cross already looming large in the distance. This is his program for God come down to earth: Not the power and glory of the one Psalm 97 conjures up as its hero, but vulnerability and fragility for the one whose life of love and compassion will meet with hatred, violence and death.

God wants to be involved in the lives of ordinary human beings, of people that weren't in the best of positions or in the most comfortable places in life and prove there that God's light reaches into the darkest corners of this world, that's what the gospel, to Luke, is about.

That is, as far as he is concerned, the miracle we celebrate at Christmas - that God comes to share our joy and sorrow, comes to live in our flesh - is what a life of righteousness and peace is about. Not an easy life, not a happy ending either. The powers of the world, then and now, from the beginning out to get him and put an end to it all. But that God, that came in Christ, not giving up, ever. The light proving to be indistinguishable, the power of love indomitable.

Perhaps that's why we like the Christmas story so much: Because this little, vulnerable and fragile child, as vulnerable and fragile as we come, will in the end conquer death. Because new life will come through this child and a different future. A future where it is not the mighty that have the last say, but love and light that win the day. "Fear not", the angel says, "fear not because I bring good tidings". What could there be to fear if God is so involved with us, cares so much for us, that he is prepared to become part of us, suffer what we suffer, celebrate where we celebrate, win where we can't? Perhaps that is better after all, than the remote, mighty, glorious and untouchable God of Psalm 97. Amen.

**You put your life into our hands
when you were born
in that stable in Bethlehem.
You trusted us with the most precious you had,**

Jesus Christ your Son,
who came and changed the world forever;
now help us to trust you with ours
our lives and all our goods.

Take us,
renew and remake the world
through us.

Let your light be born in us
this day and every day

Amen