

## **Sunday 28 December 2014 Galatians 4:4-7 and Luke 2:15-21**

What does Christmas mean to you? That's the question that was asked to people passing by the Cathedral recently and then posted on You Tube. The answers started off with: being with people I love, remembering those who are no longer with us, a welcome time off from work. And then moving inside the Cathedral with some more predictably 'holy' answers: the gift of God to us, the beauty of Christ in the cradle. Mark popped up to say: God is with us in the mess of life as well as in majesty. It finished with a man who had earlier been saying how much it seems to disappoint people, cheerfully wishing us all a happy Christmas.

If you had been stopped and asked – what does Christmas mean to you? What would you have said?

I've read that Christianity is an 'us' religion, by which the writer meant that humans only flourish, only really live, in secure, long term, unconditional relationships. And that the current liberal culture often means that people might be freer and richer but they are often also unhappier.

And so the answers that start with family and friends reflect that need for relationships. Kathy reminded us of that a few weeks ago when she asked us if we were ready for Christmas, by which she meant were we ready for the birth of Jesus. This baby, born to poor parents a long way from home, among strangers. His parents who had carried with them experience of each being told by angels that this baby would be the saviour. The relationship with a child begins before birth. And this one, long before scans, was known to be a boy and came with a promise that he would be more than just a boy.

Our reading doesn't actually tell us what the angels said to the shepherds, which they recounted to Mary and Joseph. The angels had told the shepherds of the birth of 'a Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord' and that he could be found lying in a manger. The shepherds then went to find him and when they did, they told of what they had seen and heard. We learn that whilst everyone else was amazed at their words, Mary instead treasured them and pondered them.

And no wonder, for this was confirmation of the words that the angel had spoken to her and that Joseph had heard in his dream, but using even more direct language. It must have been an immeasurable comfort. They hadn't just been dreaming. This was confirmation that God is faithful, he can be trusted. She had been told to call her son Jesus. Jesus means the Lord is salvation. It was a common enough name. We know it also as Joshua. It was taken to refer to God is salvation. But here the shepherds are going further. They say that the angels had told them that Jesus is the Messiah. The one that will rescue the Jewish people from their natural enemies, who will restore the national symbols, who will bring a state of shalom where each will sit beneath their own fig tree or vine, the one on whom the entire future hope of the nation sits. And they don't stop there. They say that this baby is the Lord. By which they mean this baby is God. She is holding God in her arms, she is feeding God, God is relying on her. And not surprisingly, Mary ponders this. This baby is the true king of the world.

She doesn't know how these promises that her child will become the saviour of the world will work in practice. For now, it is enough that she knows that she and Joseph have a responsibility to be good parents to him. And to formally give him the name of Jesus, that was pre-ordained for him.

Mary will see him grow, see him embark on his ministry of teaching and healing, she will stand at the foot of the cross when he is crucified as a common criminal. She will have to share him with adults and children who adore him. She will be remembered by Paul in his letter to the Galatians where he writes of Jesus: 'God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children'. Paul's reference to adoption encompasses all of us who are not born under the law, are not Jewish by birth. Jesus, if you like, adopts us. And we are adopted into a family that is far wider than our natural families.

Jane Williams writes of the pain of leaving her family as a child and going to boarding school. She describes God as being the bit of the family that came with you wherever you went. And experiencing that not just as a great comfort, but giving security sufficient to really test whether God is truth or whether it was simply part of a her family culture.

And so, am I a part of God's family? Have I been adopted? I have made many promises, vows if you like, in the presence of God, over the years. At confirmation, as a godparent and when licenced as an LLM. Those of you who are married will have made promises to each other. The times when I have made promises have been witnessed by others in the community of faith. These occasions are the big hitting moments – the ones where the size of the commitment I'm making is huge. They are the ones I remember. There are treasures from each occasion that I have stored up. They are not just memories, but something that affirms my relationships with those in the community of faith, with friends and family, those I studied with, and of course with God. But nothing in those occasions or in life in general as I work out the promises, is ever pure unalloyed joy. There is sorrow and hardship, often more than we feel we can bear or we watch others struggling with fear, with disappointment and grief. We are given others to help us or we are given to others to help them. We remember that this Christmas story is one of both families and strangers.

Mary's response to the shepherds was to treasure their words and to ponder on them. I wonder if she reflected on God's goodness and faithfulness, it seems to me that she must have done. And we too can remember that nothing is impossible with God. We can praise him for those who have stood with us, who have encouraged us. We can rejoice with others who need our encouragement. We can remember that Jesus is with us in the mess of life as well as in the majesty.

What treasures will you have stored away from Christmas 2014?

Sarah Thomas

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