

'Glory to God in the Highest Heaven!'

A sermon for Christmas Day 2020 prepared by Revd Sarah Flashman

Readings: Isaiah 62 v 6-12, Titus 3 v 4-7 and Luke 2 v 1-14

'Glory to God in the Highest Heaven!'

Loud and Clear!

It is a voice that drowns out all others, it is a clarion call; a declaration and promise, it is a strong, strident yet beautiful voice, deafening and exacting which commands attention and demands being noticed. It points forward to the near and distant future with deep hope and profound assurance. The voice of the Lord, through the prophets, sounds loud and clear from within our reading from Isaiah 62. It overwhelms and subdues all other voices of opposition and misery. The Lord speaks of his kingdom being established, of Jerusalem restored, of salvation for all (gentiles included). I love the use of repetition in verse 10 and the exhortation that accompanies it; 'go through, go through the gates....build up, build up the highway'; there is a way through, there is a way ahead! At that time, God's people were in disarray, ousted from all that was familiar, far from their natural and spiritual home and it is into their hardship that the Lord's voice comes; powerful and full on. Volume turned up. This is what God will do.....

God off mute!

And yet, it seems according to the scriptures that there was a time that the heavens seem 'shut up' and God seems silent. All earth and humankind was on pause. Until... the goodness and loving kindness of God that prevailed as the birth of Jesus was announced; 700 years later. As our Titus reading reminds us, Jesus coming was to tell humankind that the Father's heart was open that his hands were outstretched in love. God was 'off mute'. And so, Matthew and Luke give us the nativity narrative infused with love, it gives us the voice of Gabriel opening the door of opportunity, the voice of Mary saying yes and so joining in with God's redemptive and restorative mission, the cry of the Christ child as God incarnate comes to where we are, the voices of the angels announcing the breaking in of God's peace, the voices of shepherds worshipping (despised as they were by the orthodox, in their difficulty with keeping all the ceremonial laws and handwashing!) and voices of the magi paying homage as they offered their gifts. And around these voices, God's voice surrounds and infuses them all.

The Sound of Worship!

Isaiah makes reference to the sentinels, the watchmen posted upon the city walls. Watching and waiting, their voices rang out when danger was spotted but equally when a runner was recognised bringing news. Today, as always down the millennia, there are those gifted with specific prophetic gifts, however, it is all of our prophetic voices together that join in worship offering the 'forthtelling' of all that God is doing in our midst. This acts as a fantastic clarion call. As we read together the liturgy of Christmas Day; the scriptures, the prayers, the breaking open of God's word, as we worship and receive Holy Communion, we together declare loud and clear all that the Lord has done, all that he is doing and all that he is yet to do. We are all a part of that 'forthtelling'. Daily, in our devotions that 'forthtelling' continues as we individually immerse ourselves in the scriptures and prayer. The voice of prayer and praise is never silent and the fact and habitation of this daily devotion flows out and becomes a part of our everyday lives.

Numerous voices that have traversed the centuries and continue to shout out, stand in opposition to God's ways, his truth and his Kingdom values. Just this week the newspapers have declared Christmas is cancelled! Well, they have to sell newspapers, although I imagine there are plenty of folk who would rather not at this present time read the daily, dreary, depressing news! How can Christmas possibility be cancelled? Christ has come; in his incarnation he has given himself for us, overcoming death and hell and now raises us to new life as we trust in him. Fact! He is come and he will come again. Whether we can meet in person or not, whether we can be physically present in our church building or not, whether we can be together with others as we worship or not, God transcends all of this separation binding us together. Our prayers and voices are still like sweet smelling incense that rise to his throne as St John offers in Revelation 8. All of our prayers and worship from wherever we are, past, present and future are gathered together by the angels into a vast golden censer.

So many of us in these days, especially as we face the possibility (or perhaps inevitability) of yet another lockdown, feel deeply exhausted, some feel depressed and in despair, others overwhelmed with sheer loneliness and full of pain. Brokenness at such times needs to be named. Many of us are broken people whether we know it or not.

May the Lord so give us all the courage to find a voice, small and weak perhaps, maybe just a whisper, but with just enough volume to continue to be heralds of the great story of God's redemption. God's great meta-narrative has woven its way through plague, war, economic crisis and all manner of national disaster. May we find peace as today, we are reminded once again of the vulnerable Christ child, in a filthy stable, with a family who were up against it. May we find his presence, peace and compassion wherever we are and wherever we find ourselves. God is love and in him is no darkness at all. May we hear and know this again loud and clear. Amen.