

Christmas Day  
Year A - December 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016 - 10am

Isaiah 62:6-12  
Psalm 98  
Titus 3:4-8a  
Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

**In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...**

When we think about all that Christmas means, and all of the emotions that go with it, it is natural, of course to think of Christmas as a time of great hope, of joy, of festivity and excitement. And it is all of those things - after all, any of you who have had small children (or even slightly older children) up since early this morning, or can remember those days will be quite clear about that aspect of excitement and joy!!

I was intrigued, then, as I spoke with a colleague the other day, who happened to be a guest at a carol service that was held last week at Lambeth Palace, hosted by none other than the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. Now those who are regulars will know my affection for the previous Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, and how I used to quote him frequently in sermons. It is true to say that I was slightly worried when Rowan retired - after all, there have been few with an intellect like his in the past.

But I have come to see that Archbishop Welby is equally gifted in his ministry - and so I was interested to hear from my friend what pearls of wisdom the Archbishop had to share. Imagine my surprise, then, when I was told that Archbishop Welby spoke not of the joy, or of the spirit of giving, or even of the great sense of community that is evident at this time - rather, he spoke about *forgiveness!* Goodness, I thought - how dreary!

But as I thought more about it, and as I read Justin's words I came to agree with him - which is just as well, really, as he is my boss, in a slightly distant sense!!

This is what he said by way of introduction: “One of things Christmas always makes me think about is forgiveness - why Jesus is so essential in helping us forgive others, and be forgiven ourselves. True forgiveness is very difficult: it can feel almost impossible - and on our own, it is.

How can there be forgiveness for what’s happening in Aleppo? How can there be forgiveness in Berlin, or for many of the other things that are happening around the world? What does it take? Can a human being create that forgiveness?”

It’s a good question, I think. It seems that 2016 has been a particularly dark and depressing year, has it not? Things generally seem to be getting worse, not better - and I think that Justin’s point is actually that all too often we rely on our own strength, our own ideas and plans, and less and less on considering what God’s plans might be. And that is the case when it comes to this sense of true forgiveness.

This is only something that comes from God. Nothing less than God makes possible the kind of action that, for example, allows a victim of the recent bombing of the Coptic Cathedral in Cairo to say “I forgive them”, even as she lies on a hospital bed with severe injuries from the blast.

The extraordinary claim of Christianity - which would be ridiculous if it weren’t true - is that this child who comes so unnoticeably, so hidden, is so essential to forgiveness, because he is God himself.

The Archbishop went on to describe three ways in which Jesus, born amongst us at Christmas, is essential to forgiveness:

First, he loves us and he is with us. This is not about God “*for us*” - or God “*to us*”, and pointing his finger at us. This is about God “*with us*” - taking on the burden of everything we are not, and everything this world has going wrong in it. When we need forgiveness, we fear that what we’ve done has changed something in us - and those we’ve harmed - so dramatically that we can never be forgiven.

We may feel, how can we be loved in the light of what we've done? We all feel that at some time. I'm not talking about when you just say something stupid or hurtful... I'm talking about those things many of us will have kept deeply to ourselves. Those things we know deep down have broken a relationship, or damaged someone, or even continue to damage us by our silence. God with us reminds us that we are never distanced or separated from God, even in our human condition.

Secondly Jesus is also essential because he bears the weight of our wrong. What we've done needs to go somewhere. Where there's been crime, great sin, great cruelty, it needs to go somewhere - that's what justice is. Justice says there must be a cost to wrongdoing. Jesus is the place to which it all goes. And that's where the Easter story becomes central. We tend to so separate out in our minds the 2 great Christian feasts of Easter and Christmas, somehow forgetting that they are inextricably linked - two sides almost of the same coin - it's not possible to have one without the other.

And finally, Jesus is essential to forgiveness because he remakes us. This birth we remember at Christmas contains the possibility also of our own birth - our recreation. Just as in Jesus' death there is our death to all that is wrong, in his birth is our birth - a new start that's possible because of him. That is something that is true for every single person.

Giles Fraser, the wonderful UK Priest and Theologian, wrote the following this week, "I think what you have with Christianity is a sense that there is something more, something still to be discovered. Theology will always end in rubbish because you're making raids on the unspeakable. Poetry does it, great music does it, and I think theology is of that order. It's not an attempt to describe the world in a scientific way. It's puzzling over the nature of things, and the best description I've come across is the Christian story, and particularly the story of Christmas."

As we ponder this most remarkable feast, one which on the face of it makes no sense, let us consider how God, born among us, offers us the chance for true forgiveness. Forgiveness of the other, as well as the chance to forgive ourselves.

May you discover that new start, that new birth, this Christmas. May your life be transformed - as was the world at that first Christmas - and may the Christ-child be born among you, that you might be changed...

In the name of God. Amen