

## DO NOT BE AFRAID

Isaiah 9. 2-7  
Titus 2. 11-14  
Luke 2. 1-14

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

The poor shepherds were terrified. An angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. ‘Do not be afraid’, said the angel, ‘...I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’ This phrase – ‘Fear not’ – is a recurring motif in the Christmas stories; and is used by angels of God not only in front of the shepherds, but also before Mary (when she is told that she will give birth to Jesus) and to Joseph (in a dream, when he is reassured that he can take Mary as his wife). This phrase – ‘Do not be afraid’ – is a significant reminder to us that the overwhelming news of the Saviour’s coming is all that the human heart could hope for; and it also reminds us that his coming powerfully disrupts the world and our lives. When our Lord came into the world, he came so that he could literally renew the world and renew *us*.

As Christ comes into the world, the scene is not (as some Jews may have hoped) like that of the first landing of an occupying army. Nor is it like (as others may have feared) the sign of the first breach in our defences by a powerful enemy who wants to take all that is ours. No, when God comes among us, he does not clear humanity out of the way. He becomes a human being. He does not force his way in to dominate and crush; rather, his arrival is announced by the sharp, hungry cry of a new-born baby. This baby will change and renew the world not by law and threat, but by death and resurrection.

Jesus comes in stillness. He comes in dependency and weakness. He comes down from heaven as God's absolutely free gift. Yet at the same time, he also comes from the heart of our own human world and life, because he comes from the womb of his mother Mary, who has given her heart to God in trust. This baby who comes is utterly different: he is like us in all things, and yet he will be the human being who lives God's own life on earth.

The manner of our Lord's coming tells us many things, and one of them is that human nature, even bruised and disfigured as it is by sin, is still capable of bearing the life of God. When Christ was born, when he came to the earth as flesh and blood, he provided us with a model for humanity. He allowed us to see what human beings like you and me were made to be: like Jesus, we were made to be bearers and carriers of divine love. And with the birth of our Lord, we are provided with an opportunity to make our journey right back to where we belong; back to God, and back to what we were made to be. To live as God intended us to live does not mean that we have to undergo such radical surgery that we barely seem human anymore. Jesus came to us as a baby; he came to his own; and we who share his humanity have the promise of living something that far surpasses our hopes and expectations.

If we take a moment and look at the world around us, we see that many people are fearful. They are fearful, for example, about what is going to happen in the world (and I agree that the recent events in Syria are indeed a cause for worry). Others are not so apprehensive about what is going to happen not in the world, but about what is going to happen in their own lives. Understandably, they ask questions like, 'Will I be able to remain healthy and fit?' 'What will life be like for my children and their children?' 'What is in store for us all?' I confess that I asked myself these very same questions as I lay in a hospital bed in the Neurology Ward of Southampton two weeks ago.

In the face of these real and honest questions, the coming of Christ to the world reassures us. God is not a hostile alien. He is not going to snatch away what belongs to us. No, when Jesus (who is God) comes to the world, he comes as no stranger. He comes to embrace the world in love; after all, was he not involved in the very creation of the world itself? And his heart reaches out to all of us who are human beings and part of his created order. He, who is no less than the Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God and Prince of Peace, knows our fears and understands them.

Those of us who (in faith) celebrate our Lord's coming into the world do not necessarily have to worry about publicly defending our belief in his coming. Rather, you and I are simply called to witness to the world (including those who are fearful). We are invited to proclaim that the world will never be fully itself unless it receives God's presence – manifested by this small baby in a manger – and recognises that this infant is in fact the 'true light', the centre of all human and created life.

When we think about becoming who we really are and who God has fully intended us to be, some of us might be a bit afraid. Some of us do not welcome having our lives interrupted or reconstructed! But if we can simply recognise that our destiny in God is more glorious than our best imagining, we can be reassured. We can wait in peace for God to fulfil his promises to us and to show us his plan for us.

As we encounter those in the secular world around us who are fearful, we cannot expect that they will immediately believe us when we say that there is nothing to worry about; or when we say that to have faith in this small infant born in Bethlehem will lead to true human dignity and self-realisation. No, we will most likely be called to show these people first that we understand them; that we are on their side; that we also are human and have known what it is to be fearful. We will have to be

patient. We will have to be loyal. We will have to be loving. We will have to be models of reconciliation when there are differences and misunderstandings.

And then, as we do this, we might find that we are faced with new questions ourselves. How practically do we proceed as a people of faith in a fearful and difficult world? Thankfully, we are not left on our own. For those of us who have faith in this firstborn son wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger have the assurance that our Lord's presence is *in us*; whether we are aware of it or not, he speaks and ministers to others through us.

You see, as God sends us out into the world, he makes us more than we are, and not less! As you and I witness in the world, our life of faith will be made visible to that world. We can be reassured. Our lives of faith will not be threatening. Rather, they will point others to the love, holiness and faithfulness of the God we serve. They will point others to the God who is not only the essence of life itself, but the one who nourishes the human and spiritual life that is within us. They will enable others to see what a wonderful thing it is to become children of God, children who are given lives far richer than they could ever have imagined.

The uniqueness of our Christian faith in Jesus, born more than two thousand years ago, is that it is announced to us not only in a text, taken from the gospel of St Luke; it is also revealed to us in a living human presence, in the person of this baby who incarnates all the fulness of God. We may say 'Do not be afraid' to the nervous and fearful secular world, because God comes not to abolish, but rather to fulfil our hopes for humanity. And we can also say 'Do not be afraid' to each other, because we can be at peace and confident as we allow the Word that was made flesh to be born in us and speak through us. This is a great mystery that will take up all of our lifetime; it is also a great gift that is miraculously given to us in a moment, tonight, this very night of the birth of God. Amen.