

Christmas Day – YrB – 25 December 2023

Message: *Hearing and Obeying, a present!*

Creator, Redemer, and Giver of Life, known to us, through creation, communities, and communion, may we come to know the Eternal Word and Way. **Amen.**

What I am going to say this morning is really part two of two. Yesterday, we had the angel Gabriel bringing a message to Mary. Today we have an angel of the Lord bringing a message to the shepherds outside Bethlehem. Mary and the shepherds may be numbered among the least, and, in the case of the shepherds, the last and the lost.

God chooses to use them to bring about and reveal God's greatest gift to the world, God's presence with us.

Two questions arise for us from these stories, one, how does God speak to us? And, two, how will we respond?

Today, I add a third question. In what way is hearing and obeying God a present to us? This is after all the season of gift giving, in remembrance of the ultimate gift, the Logos, the Eternal Word, coming to dwell among us as one of us. If you want to know what I said yesterday, it's on our website or you can listen to it on our Facebook page.

We are so used to the idea of the incarnation, of God taking human form, that we forget how extraordinary an act it is, how challenging it is to the way that we normally live life.

This is God's speaking to us, to telling us, as clearly as possible, how to live life, as God intended, in all its fullness, to know wholeness in every dimension of life.

Our society's celebration of Christmas manages to capture some of the message and lose another part.

This is a time for being together as family, whānau, and community. It is a time for being truly present with one another. We relax and step out of ordinary time and make the effort to be with those whom we love and care for, to connect with them and through the gift of our time and presence show we love them and are bound to them.

It is also a time to remember the least, the last, and the lost. Many people will give of their time, talents, and treasures in this season, to help other, whether that be through national charities, through organised events, like the Hamilton Community Christmas, lunch taking place at the Salvation Army this year, or through acts of care for neighbours and others we meet in the community.

This reflects the pattern Christ laid out for us. Throughout Christ's ministry are examples of time spent noticing those who are considered the outcast, the outsider, or even the offender. For them Christ had all the time in the world, Christ was fully present with them, bringing them wholeness of body, mind, spirit, and strength.

Christ taught his followers God's way, by spending time with them, being present to them, being an example to them, as well as his teaching and explaining his teaching to them.

To our surprise Christ was happy to be where the marginalised, maltreated, and misunderstood were found. These are not the places any of us really want to be. But Christ's delight in people, seeing the image of God in everyone, drew him to such places to offer the gift of life.

Christ was open to the invitations from both pharisee and tax collector. Christ offered both challenge and encouragement to them. It was generally only their response that differed.

It was those who had hit rock bottom who knew that they needed the fullness of life that Christ, the Logos, the Eternal Word, offered, who opened their hearts and responded.

In contrast, to the time spent with the least, the last, and the lost, Christ has no time for those for those who have no time for the disregarded, downtrodden, and downcast, those who believe themselves to be the centre of the world, who believe that life is about them.

Christ came to show us that our riches are found in relationship and not material wealth. Christ embodied this. Born in a stable, birth announcement made to shepherds, fleeing from persecution. Few of us will have had such an uncertain start to life.

We understand the need the ultimate gift, the Logos, the Eternal Word, coming to dwell among us as one of us. Yet, as often as we express it in the right way we also lose sight of the real meaning of Christmas, in our consumerism and giving of material gifts rather than the gifts of time and presence that really, really, make a difference. The Eternal Word has dwelt among us; has shown us fullness of life; will we choose to dwell with one another after Christ's example?

The present, the gift, in the incarnation is God's presence among us, as one of us. Presence is the most precious thing we can give to anyone, it may feel as if we are doing and giving nothing, yet it allows our lives to join and become one, in shared moments.

God speaks to us in all sorts of ways, through creation, scripture, and the example of those around us. If we choose to respond with all our heart, we will often find we feel as if we receive far more than we give when we open up to caring for others.

Caring for one another brings wholeness, fullness of life, that is the gift God has promised. Will we take that risk and follow God's call to love friend, stranger, and enemy alike?

May God bless us with enough *foolishness* to believe that we really can make a difference in this world, so that we are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen. Amen. Amen.