

Saviour in All Their Distress

A Sermon for The First Sunday after Christmas Day A

29 December 2019

Merry Christmas! I hope you all unwrapped five golden rings this morning, the morning of the fifth day of Christmas. Liturgically we continue the Christmas celebration today, even though Christmas Day itself has passed. Our readings this morning reflect that ongoing celebration. Consider how our reading from Isaiah ends: "[the LORD] became their saviour in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old."

For the prophet's original hearers and readers, the "them" who were saved, whose saviour the LORD became, were themselves, God's people Israel. When we hear and read this text, that is no less true of us, for we are also heirs of salvation, grafted, as Paul explains, on to God's chosen people and sharers in the promises made to them. But the prophet speaks not just about our being saved, but about what we are saved from. The mention of our distress, in the same breath as the proclamation that the LORD has become our saviour, is a reminder that, although Christmas is always joyful, it is not always merry.

We can experience joy even in times of great distress. I think we have all experienced that combination at some time - it is part of being human, and in particular, part of growing up. In any case, the author of this Third Isaiah text, writing in the light of the LORD's saving acts in return of the LORD's people from Exile and restoration of the Temple, saw that the LORD was the people's saviour and that God's very presence was among them.

We have experienced that divine presence among us in the coming of Jesus as Messiah and Son, which we continue to celebrate today. And we experience it even in distress, because the LORD redeemed us in love and pity. This theme carries over into both the readings from the New Testament that we have heard this morning. The epistle speaks of the importance of Jesus' redeeming role as Saviour and High Priest when the unknown author writes, "Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested."

The word "suffered" here, like its Greek equivalent in the original, can be used in two senses, to talk about what a person undergoes, whether good or bad (or indifferent!), or to talk about a person's experience of pain or grief. So according to Hebrews, Jesus was tested by everything he experienced, not just by his suffering at the end of his life. He is like us because he has experienced life as a human being; he understands the human experience. And that makes him able to be a high priest for us, the one who makes sacrifice for sin on behalf of the people. He can help us because of the mystery of the Incarnation which we celebrate in this Christmas season, because of who and what he is, a human being just like us, as well as the Son of God.

In the Gospel, we find Jesus and his parents plunged into the uncertainty of that human condition in a big way. The Magi had set off Herod's suspicious mind - which doesn't seem to have been hard to do - and had to return home a different way, to avoid Herod's capital city. An angel tells Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt to get away from whatever Herod may have planned to do to rid himself of this child "born king of the Jews". Curiously enough Matthew doesn't record anything about the trip from Bethlehem down to Gaza, the closest part of Roman Egypt to Judaea, or the life that Jesus and his parents lived there, or even how old he was when they left or when they returned.

Those are all things *we'd* like to know. Instead Matthew concentrated on what happened to the rest of the people of Bethlehem. Herod's soldiers were sent to round up all the children two years old and under and kill them. Apparently Herod believed, based on what the Magi had told him, that the royal baby could have been born as much as two years earlier. So the youngest children of Bethlehem were killed - through no fault of their own or their families - because the king of Judaea was a paranoid autocrat who thought everyone, including his own family, were out to get him. Almost every family in the village must have been affected. Matthew can find no words to describe this tragedy except those he found in the text of Jeremiah which he believed prophesied it: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

Here in miniature, in the life of one little village in one province of the Roman Empire, is all our distress. Here the worst of the human condition is on display and we are asked to contemplate it now, in the midst of our Christmas joy. Why? Where are God's love and pity in this? How can we reconcile the two sides of the story, terrible pain and grief on the one hand and overpowering joy on the other?

The temptation is to let one side overwhelm the other - to forget the joy, branding it as unreal, a pie-in-the-sky pipe dream for those who can't face real life, or cover over or bury the pain, reducing the Christian message to escapism that refuses to confront the reality of pain and suffering. But neither of those paths is true to the real message of this season. At Christmas we proclaim the birth of a saviour, a redeemer called Emmanuel, God with us. The message of Christmas is that God is *always* with us, in joy and in sorrow, redeeming us and through us our world. Nothing is too bad for the God who died as a criminal on a cross to share with us, no day so dark that the light of Christ cannot shine in it. And that is Good News for every day of Christmas, in fact for every day of the year. May God give us the grace to proclaim it in our lives. Amen.