

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

Rev. Catherine Buchan

## A THOUGHT FOR THE NEW YEAR

1<sup>st</sup> January 2017

Isaiah 63:7-9  
Hebrews 2:10-18

When people think of the parts of the Bible which they expect to hear read at Christmas, they look, of course to the story from Luke about the annunciation to Zechariah, and then to Mary, the story of the journey to Bethlehem (that's about one verse) and the birth in the stable, followed by the story of the angels and the shepherds. And we have had these readings. People think too of the story of the wise men coming from the East to bring their gifts to the child – and we will read that next week, just a couple of days after Epiphany. Some of you might also expect to hear some of the well-known prophetic words, about a virgin conceiving and bearing a Son named Emmanuel, or about the people who walked in darkness seeing a great light – and we have used these as well.

But what we read this morning, from the 63rd chapter of Isaiah and from the 2nd chapter of Hebrews are probably not the parts of Scripture which leap to mind. These are not Christmas readings, are they? And yet that is exactly what they are, in that they spell out the message of God coming among us very clearly, and God coming among us is what Christmas is really all about.

Of course, today is not just a Sunday in the season of Christmas, but it is New Year's Day, an artificial construct in one way, but one which we need, so that we can number our days and years. *"Teach us to number our days"* sings Moses, the man of God in Psalm 90, *"That we may gain a heart of wisdom."* And so we mark our days and weeks, our months and years and as we do so, we should be looking to God to gain a heart of wisdom. Looking to God means looking to the Word of God and asking God to speak to us through it. And so, seeking wisdom for this year of 2017, we look to the passages which we have read.

Both of these lesser-known Christmas passages talk about God being with us. The passage from Isaiah is set in the midst of a description of the people's sin and the judgement they have brought on themselves. Their sin is that they did not appreciate what God had done for them, and what was that? Isaiah, with a reference back to the days of the Exodus, tells us here. *"...He became their saviour in 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."* Isaiah reminds his people that they have been saved in the past – and the implica-

tion is that they will be gain in the future, because this is how God works – by God's presence with them.

God's people back then, in the days of the Exodus, and God's people then in the days of Isaiah, and God's people then in the days of the coming of Jesus and God's people ever since and now are like children who are facing new experiences. New experiences are exciting, but they are new and so have that element of the unknown, that frisson of uncertainty about them. Just as when we look at a blank calendar and wonder what will happen to fill these days, just as when we look at a blank diary and resolve to make these days as good as we can, straining our eyes forward into the future can be alarming. What will happen? Will we be able to cope with what is asked of us this year? Asked by others, asked by ourselves, or asked by God? And God's people, who are just like other people, can feel like children, and want to reach out for a hand to hold. Nothing is so difficult or frightening if we do not feel alone.

And when we reach out, there is God, seeing our outstretched hand and reaching out in love to hold it tight. He did not send a messenger to give directions from afar to his people. He did not even send an angel to tell them what to do. He came to his people and he stayed with them. And he did that supremely when he sent his Son.

The writer to the Hebrews expands on the point that Isaiah had made. Jesus, he says, could only save us if he were in every way like us. And so he came, not God from afar blasting things out of his path, but sharing our flesh and blood. The message of Christmas is deeply spiritual, it is to do with the forces of good and evil, to do with things of which we can only understand vague hints and partial rumours in Scripture, such as when our writer here says "He himself shared the same things (that is flesh and blood), so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil...." We are taken with such words into the realms beyond sight and touch and sound. We are taken where in one way we have no right to be, and where we cannot fully understand.

And yet, the message of Christmas, which is not just for a season but for every day of every year, is very down to earth and practical. Jesus took on every part of being human. He took them on for real. He did not play at being human, he was not like children dressing up in strange clothes and pretending, he was not like an actor on a stage, playing a part for a while and then becoming his normal self once more. Jesus became one of us. Full stop. End of story.

There is a TV series which you can still find on iPlayer, which is called "Being Human." I have never watched it, but I understand that the central premise of the storylines is that there are supernatural beings – werewolves, ghosts, and vampires - living in modern Britain and seeking to take on being human, and not revealing their true nature. Because they want to be with humans, and not live apart from them, presumably because that would be lonely, they face all kinds of difficulties and dangers. The point is that although they look human, underneath they are still what they always have been, ghost, vampire or werewolf, and so a bit scary. Jesus was not like that. He was not a spiritual being who tried to come close and to look like us. He was one of us. He was born like us, lived like us, knew difficulties, challenges, choices, pain and pleasure like us, and in the end he died like us.

The wrong choices of humanity are what is at the root of the spoilation of creation. There may have been war in heaven, there may have been rebellious angels, as some of the stories imply, but the choices of human beings, people, made in the image of God, were and are what brings the real evil. (You can't blame the devil!) And so Jesus became one of us, human for all time.

And being human he understands us. Being human he is merciful and faithful, to us as well as to God. Because he himself was tested, and suffered, he is able to help us when life is painful and in any way testing for us. He is able to help us remain merciful and faithful, and to live with hope, no matter what the circumstances are.

When God looks at us, because of Jesus he sees us as family. We are named as the sisters and brothers of Jesus, which is the most amazing thing. At the Mains House Christmas service the day before Christmas Eve I said something to one of the residents about doing something with my son, and she said that she did envy me having a son. She had two sons (and some daughters) and in her opinion every mother loves her sons best. This is a statement with which I would firmly disagree! Every good mother loves her children equally, but shows it in different ways according to the different natures of the children. As do good fathers. And if we are named as the sisters and brothers of Jesus, then this means that our good, very good, heavenly Father loves each one of us as much as he loves Jesus himself. Now that is a thought of hope and wonder to take with you into this new year!

As you think about this new year, as you think about those blank days in the calendar and as you make your resolutions to do better, use them better, show generosity in them, make the most of the days you are given, it is good to remember that the readings today note that there is no resolution needed from you or me towards humanity, for humanity has already been resolved by God to be embraced, carried, helped and loved by the loving Creator. God made his resolution two thousand years ago, or maybe before the dawn of time, when he resolved to allow his Son Jesus to become one of us, so that each and every one of us could become children of God.

So, as you move into a new year, don't forget that it is God with us, God's presence with us which will make the difference in these unknown days. Don't forget that when you feel alone, or a bit scared or worried, you can reach out your hand and discover that your loving father is walking right beside you, that Jesus, who is one of us is there with you, lifting you and carrying you all the days of your life. That is the message of Christmas, which is more than a message, but a world-changing reality, waiting for us to realise and be a part of by God's grace. Amen.

--- 000 ---