"HERE IS YOUR GOD – 3"

Isaiah 40:9; John 1:14

One of the ritual cries of this time of year – heard from pulpits and pavements alike – is a despairing lament that no-one hears the true message of Christmas any more. Amidst the tinsel and turkeys, the pealing of church bells and the tinkling of cash registers, the cute warbling of primary school carol concerts and the brash bellow of Noddy Holder, the homage paid to Amazon and the interest paid to Visa, no-one seems to be quite sure any more what the real content of Christmas is supposed to be. And those who can see that Christmas is not all about eating and drinking, who realise that the good tidings from the sky is all about angels and not satellite channels, who recognise that there is something beyond the crass commercialism and merry materialism of the twenty-first century western Christmas (although they seem very loathe to do anything about it), still can't really tell you what it is about. Some of you may recall that we made a little video a few years ago and interviewed people in the town about what Christmas really meant to them and the answers were all the usual ones about families and peace on earth and trying to help the disadvantaged – all the kind of warm and cuddly stuff that we think we're supposed to say.

But the very heart of the message of Christmas is something that we've been reflecting on for the past couple of weeks here in our morning services. Isaiah, the prophet who seems to have most to say about the Messiah whom the Jewish people were expecting, about the news of God's plan of redemption and rescue for his own people – and for all humanity – is given the basic content of every Christmas sermon there will ever be in the passage we heard just a couple of minutes ago. In *Isaiah 40:9* he is told what the *"good tidings"* will be, the *"good tidings"* that he is to shout out to a waiting world, the *"good tidings"* that the angels proclaimed to those terrified shepherds out on the Bethlehem hillside on Christmas Eve. This is the good news on which the whole history of the world hinges, the good news that will mean release for the people who first heard it in their seemingly hopeless exile in Babylon, the good news that will mean reconciliation for all men and women who have come adrift from their originally blessed relationship with God.

The message of Christmas is summed up in the four words that Isaiah was told to shout proudly and passionately from the mountain top to those dislocated people of Israel and, through them, to everyone who has ever lived since: *"Here is your God"*. The God who was, for those people and for so many people today, incomparable and incomprehensible is now suddenly made real. No longer remote and unapproachable, this God who wants to be like a shepherd to the peoples of the earth is now among us in a form we can understand and connect with. The God who flung stars into space, who spoke the universe into being, who dwells in unapproachable light, is suddenly here among us, clothed in human skin and bawling in the muck and mess of a Bethlehem boarding house stable. He can be seen, heard, touched,

smelt. He can reach out and touch people physically. He is, as the seventeenth century poet Richard Crashaw put it, *"Eternity shut in a span"*.

You see, that's what the reading from John's Gospel is all about (the one Helen read to us just now). John doesn't have a story of Jesus' birth like Matthew and Luke do. John's the poetic, theological gospel writer. This amazing poem with which he kicks off his gospel is his way of expressing the coming into our fragmented and fractious world of the God who put it all together in the first place, the God who had such high hopes for humanity and whose heart was broken when we walked away from him. Despite the constant invitations to come back to him, spoken by the prophets and patriarchs of the Old Testament, despite his efforts to draw us back to himself, in the end there was nothing for it but to come and get us himself, to enter this world of disappointment and frustration and speak to us through the life of a fellow human being – Jesus. As John puts it, *"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."* Or as Eugene Peterson so memorably puts it, *"The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood."*

Suddenly, on that first Christmas night men and women, following the shout of the prophet and the song of the angel, could cry out with confidence, *"Here is your God!"* That's what it's all about. Look at these letters (slide: *Godisnowhere*). What do you see? For those desolate and dislocated exiles who first heard Isaiah's words, God was nowhere (slide: *God is nowhere*) – just a remote deity to whom they had once expressed some allegiance, a God who was beyond them, beyond the stars, up there in heaven, unable or unwilling to help them or protect them. And there are many people today like that. Their idea of God, their view of this deity is of a God who doesn't connect with their world in any way. Maybe some of you here tonight, even. There may have been times when you've paid him lip service. You may have a vague idea that he's something to do with Christmas, but he's nowhere as far as your world view is concerned. You can live life quite easily without him. Until that point when it all goes pear-shaped, of course, and your own resources are quite inadequate to cope with the situation you're facing.

But the message of Christmas is that we are wrong to assume that God is nowhere. The message of Christmas is that *"God is now here"* (slide: *God is now here!*). We hear the good tidings of Isaiah and of the angels: *"Here is your God!"* Here is God in human form, the cute baby of a million Christmas cards and school Nativity plays. The cute baby who grew up to be a man and showed us all a better way to live, who taught us how to re-connect with God. And then who showed us just how serious he was about it by going to Golgotha, because he was just dying to make it all become right again – the cute baby, whose body was now raw with the weals of the whip and nailed naked to a cross. And just as Isaiah had said, just as the angels had said, so the Roman soldier standing there as Jesus died said, *"Here is your God!"*.

And that's what we're proclaiming here tonight. In our carols, in our readings, in our prayers – and, all being well, by our lives – we are saying *"Here is your God!"* God is now here. Eternity has broken into our time. Heaven has broken into our world. God is here with us – and here to make a difference to our lives, to our world, to our eternal future. It's good news. It's glad tidings. It is life-changing, earth shattering, mind-blowing truth. May it affect your Christmas this year as you begin to realise how it can affect your eternal destiny. Ponder that as the young people's orchestra play for us now.