

Advent 2

Luke 2¹⁻²⁰ / Psalm 73²²⁻²⁶

God comes to you and I at Christmas time. God comes and we find salvation. God comes and we find rest. God comes and we find peace. God comes and we find consolation if we are willing to accept it. Sometimes, of course, we resist. Sometimes we look to our own resources for the things we need. Sometimes we demand our own way. Sometimes we struggle to prove our own worth. And when we do this God waits. God is patient. God will wait all our lives for a response if need be. God will not condemn us just because we keep him waiting even though, it may well be that the greatest hurt we cause by this waiting is to ourselves.

How patient is God? Consider this, it took God 5 days to create the heavens, earth, sun, moon and every living thing; 1 day to fashion humankind in his image before the fall. What has God been doing since that time? According to the Bible, ever since the fall God has been working on restoring us.

When God comes, faith rises. When God comes we dare to believe. When God comes we begin to see with the eyes of faith. When God comes we see what is the true nature of faith.

The whole theme of Christmas is advent – the story of God coming and if we are not careful we miss the beauty of this event completely particularly as it pertains to faith.

Consider these three aspects of God's coming at Christmas time.

One. God comes not as an imperial power but as a weak and vulnerable baby. It was Satan who offered Jesus power over the world but Jesus flatly rejected this offer...

⁹Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; ⁹and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall

down and worship me." ¹⁰Jesus said to him, "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.'" (Matt 4)

Faith never looks to take another over – to win by domination. I think we must truly take this seriously in an age when we still believe that the way to a person's heart is by either dominating their mind or their conscience or their desire for consummation. A baby can do none of these things and I believe that a careful study of the scriptures reveals that Jesus did not use these means to promote faith. When He argued it was generally to refute a point made by His enemies and even here He didn't really look to dominate but to point out things they hadn't considered. Jesus didn't look to prove God existed because in His age and with His people this was accepted by most people. The question was, how did God act and on this point Jesus lived out the life of God. He was the living example of that life. Nor, I suggest, did Jesus look to make people feel guilty or accept their guilt. Yes He slammed the Pharisees and Sadducees and He was quick to point out their culpability but you just don't see Him doing this with the people at least not as a primary tool of His preaching. Nor did Jesus promise great reward for belief – at least not material reward. Instead He called for sacrifice; for giving; for a realistic understanding of how believing people would be treated by those who did not believe. He pulled no punches.

²¹Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; ²²and you will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. ²³When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next; for truly I tell you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. (Matt 10)

When Jesus comes He does not look to dominate but to witness, to comfort, to heal and to share. We too must act likewise if we are to win the world today for the seeds of faith do not grow in ground pounded by a hammer.

One of the consequences of Christ coming as a baby is something that comes with the arrival of all babies – the hard work of nurturing. God comes but that coming requires something of us – the work of nurturing faith.

When I was down south a part of my parish covered what is called the Inch Clutha which is the delta Island between the two branches of the Clutha River which divides just below Balclutha. The Island covers about 5000 hectares. It has now a flood bank right around because the Island is very low and in some places it is below sea level. Sometime there is some sizable paddocks on the river side of the flood bank and these are grazed but not highly developed because of course they get flooded quite occasionally. Farmers use these paddocks for summer feed and sometimes for wintering over. One year, however, a farmer cut hay off a large paddock and couldn't be bothered moving it over the flood bank and storing it safely. Since most floods occur in the Spring or Autumn he assumed it would be safe. All of his winter feed was in this paddock. A strange flood occurred only weeks after he'd cut the hay. It completely swamped all paddocks on the other side of the flood bank and even carried away a few stock as well. It all went out to sea. Tons of feed. He was left with nothing. He'd been careless and presumptuous with his treasured feed and he lost it.

God forbid we should ever be careless with a baby but how careful are we to nurture faith. If God comes as a baby at Christmas we may rightly view our faith as such – as something to be cared for and treasured as we would a baby and yet I am not convinced that we are establishing good habits of care in regard to our faith. A baby is cared for not just daily but hourly and sometimes more so. Are we caring for our faith daily? Are we reading God's word daily? Are we setting aside real time daily for prayer. Are we putting into our minds and hearts good things. IN Psalm 101 David makes this commitment to God...

**¹I will sing of your love and justice;
to you, O LORD, I will sing praise.
²I will be careful to lead a blameless life—
when will you come to me?
I will walk in my house
with blameless heart.
³I will set before my eyes
No vile thing. (Psalm 101)**

When God comes we must nurture the results of that coming.

When God comes at Christmas time God comes as Lord...

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.

The wise men worshipped. They recognized Jesus as Lord. But how many others did? The Shepherds – yes, but only because they'd been told by the angels in a vision. Perhaps His mother and a few others in the temple. Virtually no one else recognized this baby as Lord. When Jesus comes He comes and Lord but that lordship has a hiddenness about it which is both hard to penetrate and confusing. In our age this has become more and more obvious as we leave behind an age which in general believed in God. Our age has become hardened to things of the Spirit. Belief is not a given. Unbelief is not only common but it is haughty, it is prized, it is arrogant. **God's lordship is not obvious.**

There are many stories I could tell you of remarkable transformations brought on by the acceptance of Christ into a life once wracked by sin. This still happens but the more common story is of lives in whom the Christ child lives in a not so obvious way. Lives of quiet service; lives of uncommon loyalty in love; marriages of journeyed faithfulness; careers of long studied productivity and consistency. In such lives, through such service, hidden behind such faithfulness – God is Lord. God is Lord in the marriage which works to remain faithful; God is Lord in the career which maintains a consistently high standard of performance; God is Lord in the little acts of honesty and integrity which make a person trustworthy in the unseen places – in the private places. And this is where it counts friends.

I can stand before and preach till the cows come home but if I go home and abuse Fran, yell at my neighbour, get secretly drunk at night or watch pornography on the net – God is not Lord even though I might have preached well. God is Lord first in the hidden places. Then and only then is God Lord of our lives.

And this has a corollary in how we assess one another. You see God's lordship was wrapped up in this terribly vulnerable and human baby. This was why so

many did not recognize him. Likewise with us God's lordship will always be wrapped in frailty and tied with imperfection. Let us not be caught focusing on the wrapping when we look at one another. God's lordship is so much deeper than this. God's lordship is there if we will just look past the wrapping.