

**A Sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry
in Coventry Cathedral on Christmas Day 2018
Readings: Isaiah 52.7-10; John 1.1-14**

God comes to the world

‘The Word became flesh and lived among us’.

God, in Jesus Christ, left his home in heaven and made his home on earth.

That theme – the theme of home – has been on my mind as Christmas has approached. It took me to the first words of God spoken in the hearing of humanity, ‘Where are you?’.

Words from the Book of Genesis – the genesis of humanity that even at this point in the story has fallen from what God intended it to be.

Humanity ashamed of itself and hiding from God. Humanity that has become divided from itself: ‘The woman made me do it’, says the man.

Humanity that has become divided from the rest of creation, physical and spiritual: ‘The serpent tricked me’, said the woman.

Humanity expelled from its Eden, left to wander the earth looking for its home.

And God goes on looking and searching for humanity, speaking his word, sending his Spirit, travelling with his people in a tent and then coming in person as the Word made flesh by the power of the Spirit to dwell in Mary’s womb.

The whole sweep of scripture running from Genesis through to John comes to a great climax in the Book of Revelation when the earth becomes a place fit for heaven to make its own, for God to make his home among mortals and for humanity to find its home in God.

God comes to the cities in conflict

With this great biblical vision of God making his home among us and of us finding our true home in God in my mind, I found myself a few days ago reading a report on the recent Battle for Raqqa in Syria, an ancient city about 500 miles from here Jesus was born.

Raqqa has sometimes – and with good reason – been described as the head of the serpent – the serpent of ISIS that had spread itself across Iraq and Syria suffocating life with its grip, poisoning people with its ideology, intent on causing death to anyone who would not obey its twisted voice.

That is why, General Mattis, the – until last week – US Defence Secretary called the Coalition military campaign to retake Raqqa, ‘A War of Annihilation’. And that’s what it was – destruction of the city that, according to the Report, left hundreds of civilians dead, and their way of life in ruins. President Trump may be able to boast to the world ‘we won’. But to the ordinary people of Raqqa who lost their lives, their livelihoods and the homes where they live, the victory of lasting peace is a long way off.

As I read about this destruction wrought by war, I wondered: How can the people of Raqqa believe that

God has come to live among us, and then I read about one of the few Christian families left in Raqqa saying, “When Raqqa was bombed, we’d gather together to pray to the Lord so things would be calm”

And then I thought of Coventry, in its years of bombardment, and how in the middle of war a prophet’s voice could be heard in our city, as it was in ancient Israel exiled in an Iraqi city, promising peace, bringing good news and announcing salvation.

How beautiful to us are the feet him who stood on the ruins of our Cathedral 58 years ago on Christmas Day and proclaimed in words we know so well but are always worth saying again to the world, especially on this holy day ‘with Christ born again in our hearts today, we are trying, hard as it might be, to banish all thoughts of revenge . . . we are going to try to make a kinder, simpler – a more Christ-Child-like sort of world in the days beyond this strife’.

How foolish those words must have sounded in 1940 Britain, in a city lying in ruins that was still burying its dead.

But the world would do well to remember the words of St Paul, that ‘the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength’.

God coming to cities of conflict: coming to Bethlehem that are Herod bathed in the blood of the innocent. God coming to Jerusalem a city of insurrection against Roman occupiers. God coming to Raqqa. God coming to the villages and towns of Sumatra and Java in the midst of the tsunami.

God coming to Coventry.

God comes to our hearts

It is not only cities that are in conflict.

Every conflict in every city can be traced to conflicts in the human heart, in each person, in each of us as we yearn for peace and find ourselves doing harm.

That's why St John points us towards people in every generation – he tells us nothing of shepherds or magi or even Mary – but he speaks of each of us, to each of us when he says, 'To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God'.

To all who receive him, to all who believe . . .

'Thou who didst on earth appear,
(sang Charles Wesley – and those who sing with him)

'Thou who didst on earth appear,
by faith conceived [Mary's faith], thyself impart;
pitch thy tabernacle here
in my believing heart.

Thou, who didst so greatly stoop
to a poor virgin's womb,
here thy mean abode take up;
to me the Saviour, come.

'From his fulness', says St John a few verses after today's reading, 'we have all received grace upon grace'.

God's grace upon God's grace, astonishingly abundant grace, amazing grace, transformative grace that mends what is divided, heals what is hurt, brings light to our darkness, life to our death, and love that restores, redeems, renews, reconciles us and then runs through us in rivers of mercy to others.

Grace upon grace as God calls us to come home and to open the door of our hearts that God may make his home in human hearts.

For this, God became homeless from heaven, and homeless even on earth – before birth carried within Mary to Bethlehem, as a child fleeing to Egypt, as an adult with – in his own words – 'nowhere to lay his head', and after death laid in a borrowed tomb.

The homeless God who becomes the homeless child, comes to make his home in our hearts that we might find our home in God.

The God who has come to us sends us

At home with God we can be at home with ourselves and at home with others.

At peace with God, and at peace with ourselves, we can be peacemakers in a world at war.

Reconciled to God, and reconciled to ourselves, we can be reconcilers in a divided the world.

Saved by God, and saved from the destruction within ourselves, we can announce salvation to a world trapped in sin, and the damage it does.

Peace makers in our cities where young people including this city kill each others with knives.

Reconcilers in our land where some people want to leave the European Union and some want to remain.

Bringers of salvation, we announce forgiveness to the sinner, healing for the hurt, comfort for the grieving.

Rebuilders of the cities destroyed by war and the villages and the homes lost to tsunamis.

Voices giving sound to the words of God, crying out in the wildernesses of the world:

‘Come home!

Don’t hide from God any longer.

Come home to the heart of love that tore open the heavens to find you.

The heart on fire with love for you.

The heart that filled the child who lay quivering for you in a crib who became the man whose heart bled for love of you on the cross.

The heart that is for ever open to you.’

O holy Child of Bethlehem

Descend to us, we pray

Cast out our sin and enter in

Be born to us today

We hear the Christmas angels

The great glad tidings tell

O come to us, abide with us

Our Lord Emmanuel