

While slightly premature, because we are still in the middle of the Christmas season and still a full 6 days away from Epiphany – several of my Australian friends have been re- posting a poem on Facebook which was written in the 1960's by Howard Thurman. Thurman was a mystical, prophetic preacher active in the civil rights movement who studied with Rufus Jones and joined the Wider Quaker Fellowship in the 1960s. The poem was originally printed it is thought in his book - *Black Fire: African American Quakers on Spirituality and Human Rights*¹

The poem is entitled the **Work of Christmas**

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

It is a very powerful image, and as it was posted and re-posted it made me wonder – what is the work of Christmas? You might be mistaken from the images or experiences of the last few weeks that it is about tinsel, mince pies, carols and friends. And at one level these things are part of the work of Christmas which focuses on the sharing of joy. But actually when it comes down to it, Christmas is about Emanuel – God with us! God with us starts with joy, but as Thurman so aptly lists – God with us is played out as the fulfilment of justice and mercy – as well as joy.

The wonderful and simple Gospel reading we hear this morning plays to this. The shepherds hear the joy of the angels and leave immediately and seek the baby Jesus. Once the joy of the Shepherds visit is over in the Luke's account; Mary and Joseph take the new baby and he is named Jesus!

Actually liturgically today can be referred to as the first Sunday of Christmas or the Naming of Jesus. And the power of this name, the name that confirms the promise given before his birth is made real. In Jesus God dwells among us and the work of Christmas begins.

¹ <https://putneyfriendsmeeting.org/2012/12/26/an-after-christmas-poem-by-howard-thurman/>

For the baby Jesus – he now has some growing to do before we encounter his story again. But for us who have heard the story, year in and year out; who know what is to come through the experiences of his life, ministry, death and resurrection – today – now the work of Christmas is to continue.

‘God with us’ is the theme which the Church of England and the Archbishops set for Advent and Christmas this year. It is not a new idea – but I think they are trying to challenge us to consider how we live out the reality of Christmas every day. How do we show that God is with us?

Last Sunday, on the last Sunday of Advent we reflected that the only way that God is known to others is through the work we do in living out – through the work of our hands and mouths. It means that

to find the lost, - we must look and seek

to heal the broken, - we must confess when we are wrong; and work for reconciliation

to feed the hungry, - we must share the resources of the world, and find ways that all may find justice and value

to release the prisoner, - we must speak out against injustice and work with integrity

to rebuild the nations, - we must seek leaders who will inspire peace

to bring peace among the people, - we must live peacefully – each day

to make music in the heart. - we must make the music

Realistically this neither sounds simple or is simple. But Christmas, God with us, will only truly begin when we spend each day living as people who know it is different and can be different from how it is. This may mean at times we feel uncomfortable – but we have a big picture and a big outcome to consider.

The reading from Isaiah today underlines this. Isaiah’s poem is a song for today. The giving of thanks for what God has done. For God’s faithfulness. The song that the prophet sings echoes through time as it witnesses to the heart of who God is -- the One who clothes the naked, who brings forth righteousness even among the nations.² The second metaphor in this passage, one of the garden seems a little odd for us in the midst of the winter solstice – but it offers us an image of hope.

“For as the earth brings forth its shoots,

and as a garden causes what is down in it to spring up,

so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise

to spring up before all nations.” (Isaiah 61.11)

The image here is one of germination. In this metaphor, the prophet draws the connection between the earth and the garden. It is where life sprouts and where we glimpse the generative movement of God – which will bring forth Righteousness.

² https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3520

For Isaiah this attention is necessary for the sake of the nations and for the world! That the world may know and take delight in God's loving, nurturing movement toward creation.³

The work of Christmas, continues the work of the God of Creation – nurturing a movement which will not only delight in God's love; and delight in justice and peace on earth. It is an amazing image. One that all three of our readings today try to capture.

I don't know about you, but I seem to have watch a lot of movies over the last few weeks that seem at some level to also be trying to capture this hope – if at some level they only come across as a bit cheesy! One of the movies we watched again was *Love Actually*. It has become a Christmas favourite – and I was reminded of the desire – for even those who only see a secularised Christmas – for a society which is based on love – if only we chose to see it – that love is all around us! Now whether this love is spirit or God – it is a powerful image – to many this is referred to as the spirit of Christmas – which I think in the end is actually ' God with us'.

To live always in the spirit of Christmas – is not that we would leave the tinsel up all year round – or as a friend of mine does who leaves her tree up decorated in the front room all year and just covers it with a sheet so it is ready to go whenever she needs a Christmas moment!

The danger of course is that like Herod, we grab hold of the wrong end of Christmas and we blame God, or others, or the world for why things are wrong. So rather than acting in love to bring about change, we blame and hate so that the evils of the world compound themselves. Sometimes even when we are working for justice this is the outcome. The challenge of living in Christmas, is that we use love and creativity to bring change; rather blame and hate.

To celebrate the coming of God in one's behaviour all year long is a communal event. To live in a Christmas state of mind, peaceable and wise, is to live counter-culturally, something we can't sustain on our own for long⁴. So it is that we carry our Christmas songs and prayer into our lives - a body, brought together by the spirit from many places, united in the birth of one child – believing in peace, justice and hope!

As we prepare for the changing of the year later today. As we look back on our lives during 2017 hopefully with a sense of pride and thanksgiving, but no doubt there will also be laments – or even sadness for what has past. As we look into 2018 with longing for what is possible – for what we pray for – for the end of war and the coming of peace. Let us look, reflect and meditate on all these things in a Christmas

³ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3520

⁴ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1506

state of mind– to trust in the wisdom of God, to challenge injustice, and to uphold God's promise and speak its truth.

This New Year:

May we look into the crib may we seek:

to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

May we look at ourselves and see God in our midst.

And may it sustain us today and evermore.

Amen.