

One of my favourite Christmas poems is called **The Work of Christmas** by Howard Thurman and was written in the 1960's it goes like this<sup>1</sup>

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 one that embodies the message of Christmas - 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- and the way we have courage to live out Christmas for the rest of our days.

The wonderful and simple Gospel reading from Luke we hear today 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!

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.

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 – we are invited to embrace the power of this name.

As we so often reflect, 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 which embraces the name of Jesus. 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

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

*to bring peace among the people, - we must live peacefully – each day  
to make music in the heart. – We must make the music and share hope.*

Realistically this neither sounds simple nor 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. This may mean at times we feel uncomfortable – but we have a big picture and a big outcome to consider – as we respond to the one named Jesus.

The reading from Isaiah 61 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 righteousness springs up. (Isaiah 61.11)

The image here is one of germination – God brings forth new shoots so that the world may know and take delight in God's loving, nurturing movement toward creation.<sup>3</sup>

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. An invitation to live in the spirit of Christmas, in its message of hope every day.

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. Something which would be good for us all to hold on to at present.

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 something we can't sustain on our own for long<sup>4</sup>. So it is that we carry our Christmas songs together united in prayer every day of 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!

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3520](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3520)

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=3520](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3520)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1506](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1506)

This is the promise of the birth and naming of Jesus. It is a promise that might sustain in the difficult days and weeks ahead. Jesus came for us, that we might have a sense of the divine in our humanity. But it requires us to make room for this within ourselves for what God is offering. And it is God within us that nurtures us when all else feels too hard, or when we feel alone.

In this time in between Christmas and New Year, when many of us are lockdown or locked in. Let us remember to keep the work of Christmas moving – making room within ourselves for God to be revealed, allowing us to see the promise of hope as we release, rebuild, bring peace and make music which celebrates the power of that baby they dared to name Jesus. Amen.

We are now going to listen to a very old Christmas hymn which reminds us the need to make space for God within us as we continue to live out Christmas.