

'Give us grace fully to bear his name'

A sermon for the first Sunday of the Church Year

This is the Sunday in which, at the beginning of another calendar year, we are called to understand what faith means. There is a frequent Latin saying that was often engraved upon clocks, and it is apt on this last Sunday of the year to mention the phrase 'tempus fugit' or 'time flies'. Time has certainly flown for us. Our readings now take us from the joy and the wonder of the stable at Bethlehem and into the business of the naming the child who will be called 'Jesus', a name which means 'The Lord is our Salvation'.

What is the meaning of all this and what kind of salvation is being brought to light? The birth of a child is not separated from its fate and this is especially true for the life of this child. For this child, Emmanuel, 'God with Us', is born into a fully real world and not a Christmas card one. Just as Christmas wrappings are discarded and life resumes and The New Year comes, so the feast of Christmas comes to an end and the demands of ordinary life and its routines are once again resumed. There is a stark reminder in all this that The Christian Faith is the one which does not rest in one place alone but in a world which for all of us is so full of time's momentum and with it the call to accept the challenges and changes that it brings about. Life is in this way both whole and fractured, settled and unsettling. It is beautiful and tragic. It is full of life and yet contains auguries of death. Very little remains entirely certain, and so much remains provisional, and Christian Faith is active in the struggle to understand and to engage with these things. In this we follow the destiny of this little child, and in his birth and naming lies the terrible news that he is to bring about salvation for the whole world, one which will have a dreadful cost to himself and to his mother, who 'ponders all these things in her heart'. And so in her distress also for the world's distress.

This story is the challenge for the grounding of our faith, if it is not to be something small and vague. Isaiah reminds us of the Messiah "who became their Saviour to (the people) in all their distress". Our offertory hymn this morning will remind us that in the acceptance life's difficult things, we are called to place our trust in the God who exists for their meaning:

God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year,
God is working his purpose out and the time is drawing near;
Nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be,
When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God, as the waters cover the sea.

A.G.Ainger (1841-1919).

Here is the note of hope. Its suggestion is that God's providence and purposes underpin all our lives and the 'hopes and fears of all our years'.

The idea of Christian Faith may often seem hugely challenging, but we forget that faith is that which is incarnated in God's faithful people, including you and me. The great strength of the Church lies in its mixture of so many people who are coming to faith from many different places in life. Each has their faith story to tell. Then there is The Church which is the life of all those people committed to God in one place and at one time, as here at Holy Cross Church. Then there is the faith of the Church which lies in the lives of people like us who struggle with all that life brings them. We share those lives in a profound way through the worshipping life of the Church and of its prayer life and its sacraments. We remember especially this morning as we follow Mary and Joseph and all who find themselves strangers in a foreign land, all displaced persons and asylum seekers, all living on the

streets, all who face great trial and danger to life and limb, all, like Mary and Joseph who must live their lives under a threat. May the coming Year see our church more faithful and so more able to serve those local people who stand in need of God's comfort.

'Tempus Fugit' – time flies. But it is in times span that God's good purposes are being worked out 'as year succeeds to year', just as the hymn we shall sing this morning reminds us. It is in times like ours and places like Holy Cross Church that God's good grace fills up what George Herbert once called 'our uneven nature' and it was in times and places such as Bethlehem, not least now in King's Cross that God calls us ever into his love and trust, which takes us beyond mere human time and into the scope of his Kairos his own time, which is not like ours, but which is the eternal perspective we so much need in order to make sense of our existences.

God grant you a joyful, peaceful and hopeful new year. May he grant you strength and purposefulness and courage in the life of faith. May his Son Jesus Christ be your true Saviour and guide you at all times and in all ways.

Amen

Holy Cross Church Cromer Street January 2023