

Sermon Christmas Day 2021

When I was growing up, the only summer holidays I and my brothers had were camping holidays. Though for some families this is still very much part of their summer tradition, it seems much less common now. Many parents feel obliged to provide semi-luxurious or exotic holiday experiences for their children. The continued restrictions on travel may have some rethink this. But there is something to be said, I think, for that stripping back of our lives and living more simply, for a week or two, in the bush or by seaside, that a camping trip provides. Of course, some camp sites can come to resemble in a remarkable way so much of the clutter we might have hoped to leave behind. But, with just a tent, a mat and sleeping bag, and a camp stove there is a reminder of how little we actually do need to live well and happily. With fewer things to distract there is perhaps time to invest in those things that do matter.

When the Gospel writer John came to write about the birth of Jesus, he did so in a way completely different from Luke and Matthew, whose stories we are more familiar with at this time of year. They chose to write about angels and shepherds and no room in the inn. Today, though, we hear a very different voice. But, in their different ways - with their different nuances and emphases - they all want to say essentially the same thing: that in the child of Bethlehem, in the birth of the promised Messiah - the Christ - God becomes Emmanuel, God with us. The gospels are all in agreement: in Christ, God is present among us.

In his *unique* way John expresses this as, *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*. In the text placed before us today, the evangelist is careful to emphasise that this *Word* is to be understood as God himself, the very agent of Creation, and that the eternal Word has now taken form in human flesh. In a wonderful use of images, what we translate as, *dwelt among us*, can in fact be translated as *pitched his tent among us*. The divine, eternal Word goes, if you like, camping!

The Good News Christians celebrate at Christmas is that God doesn't remain strange and distant and remote. The Good News Christians celebrate at Christmas is that God can be known, loved and befriended. The Good News of Christmas is that God climbs into the tent of our human existence; in the babe of Bethlehem God climbs into the tent of our skin, to share our life, that we might share in God's life.

Now, the image of the tent would have had very strong associations for the first hearers of John's Gospel. No Jew of John's time would have missed the wonderful connection implied. As they heard the words, and *he dwelt among us/ he pitched his tent among us*, the minds of those first hearers would have immediately gone to the ancient stories of the sacred tent - the Tabernacle - in the wilderness. The tabernacle ordered to be made by Moses, the great hero of Israel, who led his people out of slavery, who gave the Ten Commandments and led them through the wilderness for 40 years. And in those years of wandering toward the Promised Land, it was the Tabernacle, the tent, where God was known and encountered. It was known as the Tent of Meeting because it was there that God would meet Moses and share His word with him.

As he writes his Gospel, John is saying to us, then, that in Christ is found the new meeting place; the new, agreed place of encounter with God. No longer is the opportunity to know and encounter God limited as it was for Moses. The Good News of Christmas is that in Christ that meeting is opened to all. It is why in this, and many other churches, there is what we call a tabernacle on the altar. It is covered with a cloth (a veil) to remind us of the tabernacle in the wilderness, and that God in *this* place, dwells amongst his people. It also reminds us that in the bread and wine of the Eucharist Christians once more have an agreed place of encounter with the Living God.

The first hearers of John's Gospel, then, had strong associations with the image of tent or tabernacle. It was a remarkable and new way of thinking about God and our relationship with God. Images, though, are always limited. But the associations we bring to images - including scriptural images - are worth noting. Now, to speak of a tent we might think of summer holidays. We might also think of the discomfort of camp mats, of yet another BBQ tea, of cramped conditions, of boredom on rainy days, of hearing the neighbour in the tent next to you snoring through the night. But more positively the associations we might attach to the image of the tent are of flexibility, portability, adaptability, of travelling light, of simplicity. I would suggest that it is some of *these* associations we might well reflect on at Christmas as we celebrate the God who has pitched his tent among us. And so rather than think of faith and our life with God as being something monumental, stagnant, stuck in the past - as faith is often perceived - we might see it as something vital and vibrant, as something that we can carry with us as our life changes and as our history unfolds.

For many people the life of faith and propositions of religion are just too hard, too unreasonable, too awkward and irrational to find a place in their lives. And for some that response is understandable. But Christmas is an invitation to *gently challenge* some of those reasons (or excuses) we have settled on for not engaging with questions of faith and meaning. Sometimes we prefer the baggage of our past and the clutter of our lives... Christmas is an invitation to let go of some of those heavy loads and of all the misconceptions and misunderstandings that prevent us from living that life God offers us in Christ.

For sure sometimes the baggage the church has accumulated hasn't always helped: the errors and sins of the past; too many hoops to jump through; too many layers of complexity. But if we dare to look to Bethlehem, to the manger, we see the God whose response to us - to all our troubles and doubts and questions - is so, so simple. God has done the hard work for us!

God in Christ comes to us as a person, a real human, a boy child. God comes to us as a person, whom we can know, who will speak to the deep longings of every human heart. My friends, as God has travelled light to come to us, perhaps this Christmas we could look at what we need to let go of so we can travel lighter toward God? My brothers and sisters, on this joyous Christmas day, may we take the opportunity to step closer toward God, who has already taken the definitive step toward us. Amen.