

Christmas Night/Day 2024

Readings: Isaiah 9.2-7; Titus 2.11-14 ; Luke 2. 1-20

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen. (Psalm 19.14)

Those who were hoping hope against hope I would heed Pope Francis' directive that sermons should be no longer than ten minutes... I am going to disappoint you mightily!

Year after year, Christmas after Christmas something happens to remind us that the territory which English- and German- speakers call the Holy Land, das Heilige Land, is not holy in any conventional sense. It is rather a place of war, terror, violence, and unrest. It is a place full of fear and fearful foreboding though it will also know acts of love, kindness, compassion and sacrifice. We see the tragedy, let us not forget the beauty forged against such a troubling and troubled backdrop.

At the end of the Assad regime we are again reminded of the refugee camps and the displaced Syrian peoples totalling some 7 million persons some having found a home in Vienna. Syria and the suffering it has undergone is an affront to that which we call holy. After years of one party rule accompanied by civil war we witnessed the collapse of the modern nation state of Syria, part of a manmade construct after the end of Ottoman rule for the Near and the Middle East. The mass graves that are being located tell of peoples who have suffered for generations. In 2011 it was estimated that 1.5 million Christians lived in Syria being then 10% of the country's population dropping to 300,000 in 2024 being about 2% of the population today. Under the Ottomans, various religions and ethnicities lived in relative quiet... Nowadays Syria remains a place on a knife's edge.

The above stands in stark contrast to some lines from the first verse of the much loved Christmas carol *Hark the Herald Angels sing* written by Charles Wesley in 1739 and entitled 'Hymn for Christmas-Day'. Acknowledging that God and sinner are reconciled we lift up our hearts and sing

Joyful, all you nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
With the angelic host proclaim,
"Christ is born in Bethlehem!"

Year after year, Christmas after Christmas, we congregate from the Latin meaning to collect into a flock (<https://www.etymonline.com/word/>) to make glad our places of worship with our carols of praise directed by the shepherd of our souls celebrating His birth, the birth of Jesus, the birth of a Saviour as we recall various prophecies such as the promise that God would raise up from amongst his people Israel a person who would be known as Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9.6)

Our world is troubled, we are troubled and yet here we are giving voice in praise and thanksgiving to faith in us, a faith of substance directing our hearts and minds heavenward, as we pray for the world, as we gather around the Lord's table recalling his love sacrifice.

Other carols also touch on the reality of the nations both in their ethnic and political realities then and now. In *Come, O come Emmanuel* that much loved Advent carol we sing,

O come, Desire of nations, bind
In one the hearts of all mankind;
Bid Thou our sad divisions cease,
And be Thyself our King of peace.

In *Joy to the World* we sing

He rules the world with truth and grace
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness

In the carol *Angels, from the realms of glory,*
Sages, leave your contemplations,
Brighter visions beam afar:
Seek the great Desire of nations;
Ye have seen his natal star:

The last verse of Wesley's hymn, not much sung these days with its straightforward and provocative language for those who are hindered in acknowledging their need, goes like this:

Come Desire of Nations come,
Fix in us thy humble home.
Rise, the woman's conquering Seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.
Adam's likeness now **efface**
Stamp thine image in its place

Come desire of the nations and begin with us. Make your humble dwelling in us. These poetic words firmly based and arising out of Christian theology may not be self-evident to some. Jürgen Habermas, the German philosopher, member of the Frankfurt School has come to recognise in later life the importance of the Christian moral framework at its best with its Jewish antecedents for the undergirding of liberal democracies with the rule of law. He admits openly that he is 'religiös unmusikalisch', religiously unmusical, as he leans into the Christian faith for his own framing of the world.

Efface may be an unfamiliar verb for some and means in English something like eradicated and in German something like auslöschen, ausradieren.

To return to Wesley's words:

Adam's likeness now efface
Stamp thine image in its place
Second Adam from above,
Work it in us by thy Love.

These words speak of the radical transformation needed and required of each of us as Christ's image is **stamped** in us effacing the Old Adam, the old Adam who is always even now as I speak seeking to have dominion over us. The picture of the divine image of Christ being stamped in us is of such '**Wucht**' (brute force) that the Old Adam in us is effaced and through which we become a new creation in Christ.

If the peace we desire is to become a reality so that we don't continually throw our arms up in the air in despair we must desire and seek as a matter of urgency that effacing which the Mighty makes possible through the free gift of the giving Himself for the world as we recall the promise that God would send someone who would be known as Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. That the One should be God clothed in human form is the ever surpassing surprise that is still an affront to many today. Luke captures this surprise well when he has Mary say, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God."

Returning to the desecrated Holy Land as well as the angels in Bethlehem proclaiming peace on earth. Heribert Prantl, a German newspaper columnist, asks if this wondrous narrative isn't perhaps too good to be true. Where is peace in the Ukraine, where in Gaza? The answer he finds is in being honest about where the problem lies – in humanity, which too quickly, too often and too consistently fails to be true to its

calling to be human in the fuller sense of the word as directed by God and finding its fullest expression in the Christian faith. He concludes thinking on the Christian story, if God was able to make himself small we too might be able to become small, humble and therewith human. He writes, "If God was able to become human, then human beings can become human as well." It is clearer in German, "Wenn Gott menschlich werden konnte, dann kann auch der Mensch menschlich werden." He concludes "That is our hope, the hope for a turning of time and tide." Eine Zeitenwende.

In ending just one more carol reference. It is *O little town of Bethlehem* and the last verse of the same.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in,
be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels
the great glad tidings tell;
o come to us, abide with us,
our Lord Emmanuel!

Each and every Christian knows their need of God's grace daily. We know ourselves held, but we also always know that Christ needs to be born in us today and every day, as we go forward day by day strengthened by words of St Paul having had the Old Adam effaced and being stamped with the image of Christ, which is the necessary Zeitenwende (Romans 8.38,39),

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let us pray. O come to us, abide with us, work in us by thy love, our Lord Emmanuel.

Amen.