

Christmas Day

A sermon preached by the Rector, the Very Reverend Tim Barker at the parish church of St Andrew Guernsey on Christmas Day, 25 December 2018

Readings: Isaiah 9 vv 2-7 and Luke 2 vv 1-15

In the middle of chaos and the turmoil of life, we long for peace. We long for a rest and for a new beginning. And every year, the New Year seems to be an opportunity for a new beginning. And yet, with the New Year just a week away, we come to Christmas with many questions unanswered – and not least over the consequences of Brexit. Will it be good? Will it be bad? Or just a muddle which will sap our energy and clog up the systems of government, when there are so many other ways in which we could improve and strengthen our common life.

Isaiah, from whom we heard, briefly, in the first reading, describes the coming reign of the Prince of Peace as bringing an end to oppression, as the lifting of burdens, and the bringing of hope. He comes with authority, so that we can place our full trust and confidence in him. His characteristics are justice and righteousness. For the coming of this child, this son, will bring light into darkness, and certainty into confusion. We will be able to lay down the overwhelming burdens when we trust in the Wonderful Counsellor, our Mighty God, our Everlasting Father and the Prince of Peace. This is a new beginning for a troubled and weary world. But we need to have the faith to grasp what this can mean; the hope that it is indeed possible; and the love to want this to be shared throughout the world and not selfishly keep it to ourselves.

There are some passages of the Bible, and some phrases, that have become so much a part of our language and our culture that we can easily forget that they are from the Bible. Phrases like ‘salt of the earth’. And passages like St Paul’s powerful description of love in his first letter to the Corinthians, which is read, in one form or another, in countless marriage services and ceremonies. That ends, if you remember, with Paul writing, ‘And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.’

Love is a word that is inextricably part of our understanding of Christmas. In the words of Christina Rossetti, ‘Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, love divine; love was born at Christmas; star and angels gave the sign.’ And explaining to a puzzled Nicodemus who came to him by night to discover what Jesus was teaching the crowds, Jesus says, ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’

But the message of Christmas takes us beyond love, important as that is, and recognising that the word love carried a huge range of meanings in the English language, from the fluffiest of romance to the deepest of passion.

Christmas is part of our life and culture. Christmas is a festival that has a universal power and attraction, even beyond those places where Christians are in the majority. But only those who have faith, or who are reaching out towards faith, can begin to grasp the real significance in Christmas. That is a gift of faith.

And the third of the words Paul links together. Hope. Jesus is born at a time of political and social uncertainty in Palestine and, indeed, across the Roman Empire. Does that sound familiar? Can we see parallels to the life of this Bailiwick, on the edge of the British Isles, at the end of 2018? We can see the European Union from Guernsey (on a

clear day) but we are not fully part of it, and we are still uncertain of our future relationship with both the United Kingdom and the European Union.

Even here in Guernsey, we know that there are disagreements about matters of policy and how we see the future of this island community.

Every year that passes, as we give thanks for the birth of hope, the coming of Jesus into the uncertain world two thousand years ago reminds us that we can root ourselves in the hope of the world. And then we can grow in faith, as we explore what the coming of Jesus means for us and of living and sharing his love.

'Faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.'

As we give thanks for the coming of hope into the world in Jesus, I pray that each of us may grow in our discipleship, in our walk with Jesus, so that we can live and proclaim his love to a hurting, fraction and uncertain world. And I pray that together we may live and proclaim the Christmas hope in faith and with love. Happy Christmas.