

## **Sermon - 27 November 2016 (Rev Dr Brenda Robson)**

### **Reading - John 17: 20 – 26**

During Advent our attention turns to Jesus being born at Christmas, to Mary on a donkey, a stable and a manger, King Herod, shepherds and wise men. We focus on **how** Jesus came, not so much on **why** he came.

We will hear the prophecies of old, especially Isaiah, explaining some of the “why” he came- Chapter 53 - He will be despised and rejected, he will take up our infirmities and carry our sorrows, he will be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed.

But these are heavy thoughts, not the words that many want to place alongside the warm glow of the stable, the doey-eyed animals standing around the manger, the peaceful sleeping child, “no crying he makes.”

One of the best Christmas cards I have received was made by a friend who drew the stable and the nativity scene and on a hill above the stable, three simple crosses. She was criticised for spoiling the spirit of Christmas with such a morbid picture. But that picture did address the “why” of Jesus coming.

John’s gospel gives us a number of reasons for Jesus’ birth –

John 10 – I am the good shepherd .....and I lay down my life for the sheep.....I lay it down of my own accord – the cross on the hill above the stable

John 10 – I am the gate for the sheep and I have come that they might have life, and have it to the full

John 15 – I am the vine, you are the branches.....remain in me and I will remain in you

John 6 – I am the bread of life - ....I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me but raise them up at the last day. For my Father’s will is that

everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life and I will raise him and her up on the last day.

These are some of the awesome reasons that Jesus came to live on earth. But these reasons are lost for Christmas-only Christians who don't venture out of the stable, who want to cling on to a meek and mild Jesus.

The spirit of Christmas has become lost in commercialism and chain stores and Black Friday – Ministers are expected to point that out at least once in Advent so there it is right at the beginning!

People certainly wait with bated breath for something – the Johnny Mathis song comes to mind –

A ray of hope flickers in the sky  
A silent wish sails the seven seas  
A rosy hue settles all around

And all this happens because the world is waiting, waiting ....to see who will have the best TV ad – John Lewis or M&S!

My vote goes to John Lewis this year, I quite like Mrs Claus but I enjoyed the animals bouncing on the trampoline – and enjoyed even more the Facebook posts of people's dogs leaping up and down in front of television sets copying the on-screen animals!

In the words of Taylor Swift's song from a few years back, **Christmas must be something more** – she sang -

We get so caught up in all of it  
Business and relationships  
Hundred mile an hour lives  
And it's this time of year  
And everybody's here  
It seems, the last thing on your mind

Is that the day holds something special  
Something holy, not superficial?  
So here's to Jesus Christ who saved our lives  
It's something we all try to ignore  
And put a wreath up on your door  
But here's something you should know that is for sure

Christmas must be something  
Christmas must be something  
Christmas must be something more

And of course it is so much more to believers. And I went to the end of Jesus' life on earth to find his words that speak life and joy and glory into our hearts, in John 17.

Jesus has prayed to his father for himself and then for his disciples and finally for all who will believe in the years and centuries to follow, he prays for you and I.

He prays that we will live in him just as he lives in us. He prays that we will all see his glory, the glory of God that is in Jesus Christ. He does not mention the Holy Spirit but the implication is that Christ will dwell in us through his Holy Spirit and we will commune with him through his holy spirit.

We are eavesdropping on a beautiful prayer conversation between Jesus and his heavenly father, one of the last conversations Jesus will have with his father before he dies, and his focus, his concern, his passion, is for us. That he might be in us and we might be in him.

We cannot be any closer to Christ, he in us and us in him. Jesus said to God, "I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them."

Jesus will continue to make God known to us through his holy spirit dwelling in us. How I would love to see Jesus as Philip in this book saw Jesus (Seeing Jesus by Jeffrey McClain Jones).

Philip heard Jesus' voice, saw his look of love and his expression of concern, experienced his patience and his total attention. Jesus could tell him things about people around him so that he became wise and understanding and compassionate. Jesus gave him the words to say and guided his actions. Jesus warned him about things that were about to happen. Jesus prompted him to forgive others who had harmed him and showed him his own sinfulness and need for forgiveness.

These are all the things Jesus wants to do for each one of us even although we cannot physically see him, we can hear from him and know his will for our lives.

The disciples did see Jesus after his death and resurrection for a few days, they saw him and believed in him. Thomas was not with the other disciples when Jesus first appeared and he did not believe until Jesus appeared to him and showed him his pierced hands and side. Jesus said "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed." (John 20: 29)

It is Jesus' desire that through our indwelling with him, we would be "brought together in complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (verse 23).

Jesus knew that unity might be hard for us to achieve, our human natures get in the way. Paul's letters to the churches not that long after Jesus departed from their sight highlight splits and divisions. And so Jesus asks his heavenly Father to help us to be united.

As human parents, we get so much pleasure watching our children grow together, we encourage harmony and loving relationships. We don't always achieve that but we try!

A poster on our top landing as the boys grew up had a verse from Psalm 133 in the Revised Standard translation – "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" I used to point it out to the boys frequently!

We like to see our adult children enjoying good relationships too and keeping the family united even if distance might separate them. In some families it is the grandmother or grandfather who cements the family, making sure the younger generation keeps in touch with them and with each other. Sadly, when the older generation passes on, the younger ones can drift apart, what united them has gone.

So it is with God our heavenly father. He takes great pleasure in seeing his children united in Christ and living in harmony. It is good for the children themselves but it is also essential if the church is to be a witness to the love of God. Infighting and squabbling is not attractive and is a bad witness to the love and the new birth that we claim to have in Christ.

It is a fact that some churches are so divided and factions within the church are so hostile and entrenched that they require an interim minister. These charges are usually vacant and they are in such a poor state spiritually that they are not allowed to call a minister and an interim minister is put in charge for a period of about a year to try to put things right. There are not enough interim ministers in the Church of Scotland to meet the demand. How sad is that. We should not need interim ministry in Christ's church at all.

Jesus prayed "May they be brought together in complete unity" for the purposes of showing God's love to the world.

There is no place in the church for envy or gossip or unkind words. What if we saw Jesus more, became more aware of Jesus standing right beside us, would that modify what we say and do?

We are about to say something harsh or critical or thoughtless or judgmental to someone – then we see that person through Jesus' eyes. We see Jesus look at that person with such love and compassion. Who are we to show a lack of love to someone Jesus loves dearly, someone made in the image of God?

Philip, in this book *Seeing Jesus*, had a difficult relationship with his mother who for various reasons had not been a nurturing, loving parent. He had built a protective wall around himself, always waiting for his mother's next negative comment – until he saw Jesus look at his mother one day with such love and sorrow that it changed how he reacted to his mother which in turn changed how his mother reacted to him, not completely but in some ways their relationship improved.

At this point my thoughts moved on to the word "sorry" and Elton John telling us that "sorry seems to be the hardest word." When does sorry become the hardest word. Thinking of family again, at any gathering of young children you will hear a parent say "David, say sorry to Emily!" for some misdemeanor. And David will say sorry quietly, looking away from Emily. And the parent says "Look at Emily and say sorry properly! Now give her a hug!" It's a scenario that is played out regularly in my house especially if all six grandchildren under six come to visit at once.

Sorry is a hard word for children and a hard word for adults. But it is the oil that mends relationships and heals wounds, that allows forgiveness and a reuniting of divided souls.

How we must grieve the Lord's heart with our words and behaviour at times. I can hear Jesus in Elton John's words from that same song – **“What have I got to do to make you love me, oh <sup>SEM</sup>What have I got to do to be heard.”**

Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians (4:30 – 32) –

**Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other just as Christ forgave you.**

It was a common theme in Paul's letters to struggling churches, words of encouragement and rebuke and guidance.

To the Colossians he wrote -

**“Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” (3 : 12-14).**

And what is love? Paul told us in his second letter to the Corinthians at 13: 1–13 –

**If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast,[ but do not have love, I gain nothing.**

**Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but**

**rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.**

These words are very familiar partly because they are read at almost every wedding. My heart sometimes sinks when I see a bridesmaid teetering in her 6 inch stilettos to the microphone wearing a dress that leaves nothing to the imagination which seems to defy gravity by remaining in place, at least you hope that it does. But the words are always moving and I think to myself that this might the only time this young girl will read the word of God, especially in public, and I silently pray that the words will remain with her and Christ's love will be made known to her.

The words were not written by Paul, however, for newly married couples even if they are very appropriate for that occasion. They were written to the divided church at Corinth. At the beginning of the letter Paul says **"I appeal to you brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought."**

These are the words I would leave with you to contemplate in the season of Advent and in this season of vacancy. Wait patiently on the Lord every day, seek his face and seek to do his will.

Amen