

**Worcester Cathedral – 17 December 2023,  
3rd Sunday of Advent – Eucharist 10.30 am  
*'I am with you always'***

Readings: Isaiah 61. 1-4, 8-11; 1 Thess. 5 16-24; John 1. 6-8, 19-28.

- The reading from Isaiah 61 proclaims all sorts of relief and good things for the oppressed and those who are victims of war and abuse of all types. We are told the Lord loves justice.
- v11 For, as the earth brings forth shoots ... so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations!
- The Magnificat was sung by the choir - the Lord has shown strength with his arm and scattered the proud in their conceit, casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.
  - God scatters the proud.
  - God deposes rulers from their thrones.
  - God empowers the lowly.
  - God sends the rich away empty.
  - God fills the hungry.
  - God reminds Israel to be merciful.
  - God keeps promises.
- As we look around our world we wonder when did this happen?
- The Gospel introduces John the Baptist. He tries to explain to the Jewish clergy that he is not the Messiah but the one who is
  - *The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight."*
  - *Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!"*
- Didn't the coming of Jesus that we are in the process of celebrating, God in human flesh, usher in the Kingdom of Heaven?
- But even after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, life on earth or even in the Church doesn't look like that spoken of in Isaiah or the Magnificat.
- What is it all about? The poor and refugees are reviled and suffer, children are abused, there is suffering and death all around. The rich and powerful prosper and exploit, our planet is on the way to destruction.
- Yet, we believe that all that is, is God's creation, indeed as Paul proclaimed in God we live and have our being.
- Indeed, without a transcendent source there is no logical possibility of anything.
- God is the source and sustainer, but he does not seem to be the controller.
- 13.8 billion years ago it all began with the Big Bang - something appeared out of nothing! Over billions of years first chemicals and then cells and simple creatures evolved, struggled to adapt and died resulting in new life. Dramatic extinctions resulted in new starts, complex life developed, sea creatures moved on to dry land, all a sequence of life and death. Until eventually a few hundred thousand years ago humans emerged.
- This was all a free process. God had instigated a wonderful free process; evolution went its own way and that has resulted in the wonderful life forms we see today.

- Some of the processes seem nasty - animals are part of the food chain of other animals. Survival of the fittest seems to be self-centred and can seem cruel.
- And that survival instinct has fed into some of the nastier aspects of human behaviour that we see in great measure today.
- So, suffering and death is the way the world has evolved, and is evolving.
- Some say the universe and creation are the first incarnation - life, suffering, death leading to new life are the constants.
- We have no choice but to be involved, we weren't asked whether we wanted to. We are part of the whole evolving, suffering mess and yet God has revealed himself by participating in this mess.
- We are reminded of it at this time of year. Jesus is born to a refugee family in a cattle-shed, has to flee to Egypt to escape Herod. He lived a life as a poor peasant, and itinerant teacher, was persecuted by the religious hierarchy and crucified by a cruel occupying power.
- One writer, Peter Longson who has struggled to understand where God was when his young daughter was raped twice, has suggested that God is seeking our forgiveness for our suffering by joining in it with us! A startling suggestion, but one that perhaps underlines that God really does understand our suffering and is in it with us.
- As Elizabeth Johnson, a Catholic Theologian puts it in her book, 'Creation and the Cross', 'the diversity of life that so beguiles us today is the outcome of a long struggle in which organic life keeps breaking through to life forms that are more complex and beautiful. But the cost is terrible. Over thousands of millennia new species arise, thrive, and go extinct. Yes, new life comes from death. But this does not lessen the hard truth that pain and death are woven into the very fabric of life's evolutionary history on earth. As some scholars would have it, nature is cruciform. The death of Christ becomes an icon of God's redemptive co-suffering with all sentient life as well as the victims of social competition.'
- She continues, 'Calvary graphically shows that the God of suffering love abides in solidarity with all creatures, bearing the cost of new life through endless millennia of evolution, from the extinction of whole species to, yes, every sparrow that falls to the ground. Biologically speaking, new life continuously comes from death over time. Theologically speaking, the Cross signals that God is present in the midst of anguish, bearing every creature and all creation forward with an unimaginable promise'.
- Jesus' Resurrection ushers in this new hope, a prelude to the second part of God's creative activity- the New Heaven and the New Earth.
- To quote from Revelation, 'God will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no more mourning or sadness.... "now I am making the whole of creation new.... It is already done. I am the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end.'
- God is travelling with all of creation in our suffering and yet with hope in our hearts. This is a theology of accompaniment. Jesus assures us, I am with you always even until the end of the age, when as Julian of Norwich said, All will be well.
- Richard Rohr in one of his recent meditations puts the whole sweep of Christ's work well: 'the risen Christ assures us that, all crucifixions to the contrary, God is leading us somewhere positive. God has been leading us since the beginning and even includes us in the process of unfolding (Romans 8:28-30). Christ is the Divine radiance at the beginning and the Divine allure drawing us

into a more positive future. We are thus bookended in a personal love—coming *from* Love and moving *toward* an ever more inclusive Love.’

- So, we are assured about where we are going. All the radical changes in the Magnificat will be fulfilled at the end of time, but what about now?
- Since we are in the prelude to God’s final act of creation, are we able to see Christ’s Resurrection life having real effect even now?
- While at times all seems very bleak, if we open our eyes small acts of Christ-like love can be seen everywhere.
- Jesus talked about small acts. ‘In as much as you did this to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’
- The early Church was known by the love that they showed for one another. In this Cathedral, there are many examples of acts of Christ-like love and caring for one another. It is wonderful to be aware that God is accompanying many of us in this community in life and death through each other. It is infectious, and often as one person receives an act of kindness, they find themselves offering one to somebody else.
- At this time very many people have come to the Christmas Tree festival in the Cloisters, and some have come into the Cathedral and shared their sufferings in the candle stand book as they lit a candle. There is a group here that has committed to pray for these folks that they will experience Christ’s presence in their sadness. Indeed, God is amongst us.
- In all the horrifying conflict in Middle East, God is suffering with all who are suffering and dying. The crucified Christ knows all about suffering. Christ-like love is being shown by the rescuers and medics who put themselves at great risk to bring comfort and healing in that dreadful situation.
- As we think of our planet, our Creator God longs to accompany us in contributing to making all things new. In this Cathedral the Eco group are passionate about changing our habits as individuals, and as a community to reduce our carbon footprint and enable nature to flourish around us.
- What is wonderful is that this desire is mirrored by millions throughout our world, who love this wonderful planet and all its creatures and realise their future life depends on it.
- Of course, we are disappointed and frustrated by the political compromises of COP28, and change is needed at the top to implement really effective policies, yet the pressure of millions may yet break through.
- Only yesterday I heard from WWF about the pressure many thousands in this country have brought to bear on Government to implement a rule to ensure that businesses like supermarkets will no longer sell products that come from land that has been illegally deforested.
- However, in the end we know that the completion of the creation of the New Heaven and New Earth is God’s work, so we can be confident that in the end *all will be well*.
- When we come to Communion and take the bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ, as the old communion words said – *be thankful*, for in a very real way as we eat and drink, we are assured that Christ is with us and will never leave us until the end of time.
- Amen