Sermon for Christmas Day Year A

Readings: Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-14.

i

I can’t claim to be an expert on feet, but most commentators start by addressing the subject of whether feet can be beautiful or not, so I might as well commence from the same spot. It’s their arrival that is beautiful and the reason behind their appearance on the approach to Jerusalem that is beautiful, rather than the feet themselves – not that I pass any judgement thereby on the attractiveness or otherwise of the heralds’ feet. Feet don’t do a lot for me as I belong to St. Paul’s tradition in which feet constitute one of the less glamourous parts of the body, yet play an indispensable role.

The beauty is in the message the heralds bring on those feet that the Exile is over. Jerusalem is about to blossom again and the exiles are about to return home over those very hills. This is only possible because “Your God reigns.” It is not intended to suggest that there has been a time when God has not reigned, and that now he has climbed back upon the throne from which he was deposed for a while. God has reigned throughout the Exile.

This is Good News: no matter how bleak life looks; no matter how abandoned we feel; God still reigns. God is returning to Jerusalem because God has been with them in Babylon throughout their darkest days.

The heralds are seen first by the watchmen, those appointed to strain their eyes towards the horizon to spot approaching threats. We still need such people today. We need those who spend their lives looking ahead in business, culture, politics, science and faith. Watchmen discern the trends of future events from afar, whilst they are as yet undetected by the masses. They offer warnings and allow preparations to be made. Society without watchmen is blind.

In matters of the Spirit the Church is called to be the watchman of the world. It is our duty to scan the world for signs of God’s action and to read and interpret the signs of the times.

The herald announces that this is God himself returning to Jerusalem. This is such stupendous news that even the very ruins of Jerusalem shall sing out. This is the same image Jesus uses on Palm Sunday when he enters Jerusalem some centuries later: “If [these people] keep quiet, the very stones will cry out” (Luke 19:40).

Christmas is about such wonderful news that even the stones want to cry out in praise. Is that how Christmas feels in your house? It should.

ii

The opening of the *Letter to the Hebrews* is a gold mine for theological students, but it can be a bit daunting on Christmas morning with children around playing with their new toys and mums and dads worrying about whether everything is ready for the big meal later on and how they’ll cope with the relatives. So let’s take a quick overview.

The writer addresses a Christian audience which is obviously very conversant with the Hebrew Scriptures, but who are now vacillating between loyalty to Christ and either their former Jewish ways, or a mixture of Jewish and pagan beliefs. The writer is trying to make the point that Jesus is God’s clearest and God’s final word. Loyalty to Christ, therefore, is essential, for there is no one else to come later on and no one else of former times to whom we can go. Christ alone has redeemed us.

Despite calling it a *Letter to the Hebrews*, it is no ordinary letter and reads more like an extended sermon. Over the years it has been claimed that *Hebrews* was written by St Paul, Clement of Rome, St Luke, St Jude or Apollos. It depends where you were and when you lived as to which you believe to be the author.

Perhaps Origen had it right when he said: “Who wrote it? God knows.”

What we do know is that Clement of Rome quoted it in AD96. There is no mention of the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple which is slightly odd in a sermon that is stressing that the old covenant is being replaced by a new covenant. So could this mean it was written before AD70?

Yet there is no mention either of Nero’s persecution in AD64 and yet the writer claims the recipients of *Hebrews* have not yet resisted to the point of shedding their blood (Hebrews 12.4), but very few commentators would wish to suggest it pre-dates AD64, although most accept the recipients are based in Rome.

So all we can say for certain is that it was written before AD96.

The reason fixing a plausible date matters, however uncertain we are about the details, is because of what *Hebrews* assumes is the basic, universally held truths of the Christian faith, which are considered by the writer as the mere “milk of the gospel” (Hebrews 5:12), before he goes on to the “meat of the gospel” in the later chapters.

The milk of the gospel includes the opening statements about Jesus: He is described as God’s Son, heir of all things through whom God created the universe. Jesus is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being who sustains all things by his powerful word. Jesus has provided purification for sin and is now seated at the Father’s right hand.

All of this in the first 4 verses of the first chapter!

This is why Christmas is not a private family affair and you should not be tempted to reduce it to such a thing in order to suit the secular pundits of our time. Christmas is nothing if Christmas is not a cosmic event with ramifications for the whole universe. If we Christians are wrong about this, we have nothing to proclaim. So look very closely at the child in the manger today.

Who is he? What has he done? Where is he now? What does this mean? Christmas may be easily buried by mountains of food and sheets of wrapping paper, but we should make time to ask these fundamental questions about what this day is about.

iii

It is difficult to add anything to the majestic poetry of John’s Prologue. All comment seems mundane and superfluous, yet there are many theological points that could be examined in depth.

John starts in a similar fashion to the passage from *Hebrews*, in that he starts with explaining the cosmic significance of Christ who is the Word, who was with God and was God and through whom everything that has been made was made. Jesus is the light that enlightens all people and this cosmic Word has now taken on flesh and blood in Jesus Christ.

What we also see in John’s Prologue is the answer to those questions I have just voiced regarding the passage from *Hebrews*, for John moves rapidly from the cosmic provenance of Jesus to the effect of his coming upon the people of his community, the early Christian Church.

The result of the divine, eternal Word taking on human flesh has been the people becoming “children of God.” The remainder of the Gospel is a theological treatise to expound what this transformation means and how it has come about through Jesus Christ. But the bottom line of it all is here: The Incarnation is the beginning of a story that has changed the world and has changed the lives and eschatological destinies of those who have believed.

John’s masterful opening to his gospel reminds us that the Christmas story is God’s story and it is told with a purpose. That purpose is to change the lives of all people who respond to the Word that has come into the world, full of grace and truth.

We sometimes forget that we who believe have been called to change the world. It is not sufficient, however great the story, to have our own life transformed as through Jesus we touch the divine purpose, principle and source of life. We are called to become agents with Christ to share that wonder, that light, that joy, that new life with those who do not yet know it.

That is quite some task laid upon the shoulders of such a tiny helpless babe wrapped in swaddling bands, but from here the story unfolds and in eternity it shall reach its conclusion.

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

**May 2016**