

“The Christ Is In Your Midst”

Date: Christmas Eve, 24 December 2018, 7 PM

Text: John 1: 1 – 5, 10 - 14

Rev. Peter Coutts

Once upon a time, many many years ago, there was a monastery in a small town. It was Christmas Day. The Abbot – the leader of the monastery – was walking through the park, thinking about the day. He was troubled. It seemed to him that the people of the town did not find Christmas to be a very meaningful spiritual time. In fact, he had to admit it, it seemed the same for the monks of the monastery as well. It troubled him, and he was troubled that he did not know what to do. By chance he met the Rabbi of the Jewish synagogue, also walking in the park. They chatted, and as they did the Abbot began to pour out his concerns. The Rabbi listened patiently. When the Abbot was finished the Rabbi continued to think quietly. Then he said, “I don’t know what you should do. But what I do know is this: the Christ is in your midst”.

As the two parted company, the Abbot wondered about the Rabbi’s words: “The Christ is in your midst”. He wondered what the riddle meant. The Abbot thought, “Perhaps he meant that one of my monks is the Christ!” He thought about that long and hard as he returned to the monastery. He went in the kitchen door and saw brother Lawrence busily trying to get dinner ready on time. “Perhaps he is the Christ” the Abbot thought. And he stopped to help Brother Lawrence prepare the meal. Later he saw brother Charles moving a large load of books to the library. “Perhaps he is the Christ” the Abbot thought, and the Abbot stopped to serve him by helping him with his heavy load. The next day he saw brother Francis, who was worried about his family at home. “Perhaps he is the Christ” the Abbot thought, and he offered to pray for Francis’ family. Unsure of who among them could be the Christ, the Abbot began to treat everyone with greater care and respect.

It didn’t take long for the monks to realize that their Abbot was acting differently. They asked why and the Abbot told them the Rabbi’s riddle, that “the Christ is in our midst”. So all the monks began to speculate on who it might be. And the behaviour of the monks began to change as well... just like the Abbot. They became more humble and patient, more generous with their time and more compassionate for the needy.

The people in the town noticed the change at the Abbey. The monks were becoming more helpful. They were tending to the sick of the village and being generous with the poor. Some in the village wanted to learn more about why the monks had become like this. So on Sundays more and more of the villagers went to the chapel at the Abbey, and found joyous meaningful worship there. The monks opened a

school for the villagers to teach them about the ways of Christ that they were living. The monks taught the people that “the Christ is in your midst”. In time the town began to change as well. For who knew: perhaps the Christ was one of the villagers!

All too soon it was Christmas again. This year everything was so different that the year before. The Abbot, with a gift in hand, went to visit the Rabbi. He said, “I want to thank you for your wisdom, one year ago, for it has taught us the true meaning of Christmas. Your riddle caused us to think about our faith in a new way, and it has changed our lives for the better. But your riddle had an unexpected answer. “The Christ is in your midst” you said. At first we looked to ourselves, thinking Christ was in another. But then, as we changed, we came to see the truth of the riddle. Christ was in us, in the midst of each of us. Incarnation is more than God coming to us in the form of a human child, born of Bethlehem. Incarnation is also about making room for the Christ to be born with each of us, and to live within each of us”.

The Gospel of John says, “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory... and to those who received him, he helped them become children of God... born of God... and from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace”.

“Pondering the Wonders”

Date: 24 December 2018, 7 PM

Text: Luke 2: 8 - 20

Rev. Peter Coutts

We treasure these stories. They are filled with wonder. We hear of celestial signs announcing the coming Messiah. Prophecies. Angel visitations. These stories are filled with drama. A virgin birth. Angel choirs singing before shepherds, of all people! They are filled with love. A cosmic drama that finds its climax, of all places, in a shed, in something as common as a mother, joined by the father, and the birth of a child. These stories are filled with God. So each year on this night we gather, and cram into this place in the dimness, amazed, joining the heavenly hosts in praise of God.

As this first Christmas pageant played out, we hear that Mary was amazed and that she treasured the unfolding story. I'm sure she would. Amazed, but perhaps not so surprised, to see the arrival of shepherds, anxious to view the Messiah. After all, so much had happened already to her. She too had been visited by an angel. She had been told that God's Spirit would cause her to conceive. Her cousin confirmed it. Elizabeth's husband prophesied about it. And the promised child was born. Mary would have treasured these stories, certainly. They were amazing!

But there was more to her reaction. We read, “And Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). Ponder: to reflect deeply on something. It is about dwelling on something in very weighty thought, to understand and appreciate it, to know what to do with it. I think every parent, upon the birth of their first child, asks with some anxiousness “What do we do now?”. Just imagine how that question would weigh on Mary. Ponder indeed! Her response to the angel's news that she would give birth to the Messiah is given as “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). Such composure, and faithfulness. But even so, how could she not ponder God's intervention here into history... God's fulfilment of ancient promises, at this very moment!... the coming of the very Son of God in human form... To find yourself central to this story! It is amazing, but it is also rife with implications. Mary would also be pondering: how does this change my life? What difference will this make for me? Joseph would be asking the same questions... as would the shepherds... as would the wise men... as do we. We treasure these stories. They speak of a God who cares for all creation, who makes promises and keeps them, who remembers humanity even when we forget God. A God who in graciousness would send the Son into one moment in history to change its direction for eternity. Sent not in power, but in helplessness. Sent not to rule, but to serve in love. It is a wonder-filled story.

But it becomes more wonder-full if we find our own place in the story. It becomes more wonderful when we move from being observers of this drama to see ourselves as participants in it. For indeed we are. When the angels announced to the shepherds, "For unto you this day is born in the city of David a Savior", that message was not just for the shepherds. It was for you too. When the wise men saw the babe's star, and felt compelled to draw near, that call to draw near is for you too. So tonight we stand on a dark hillside with the shepherds, in awe of angel choirs. We run to the stable to see ancient promises fulfilled. We marvel at the good and gracious work of God. For the angel was right: it is "unto us" that a Saviour has been born.

And so, like Mary, we too need to ponder. This gift to all humanity – how is it a gift to me? This coming which has changed history – how has it changed me? For how can we not be changed if we believe what this story is telling us: that God so loved the world, that he sent the Son; that he came to bring hope, peace, joy and love!; that he came to invite us into a rich relationship with him. If the God of the universe has done this for you... for you... then we must ask that question for ourselves, "What do I do now?". It does prompt us to ponder, throughout our lives, what this must mean for us.

May it lead us to be like the shepherds, taking this experience into our lives, compelling us to glorify and praise God for all we have seen and heard!