

Year C, December 23, 2018
4 Advent
Christ Church, Mexia

On this last Sunday of Advent, we have visited hope, peace, and joy. Now the theme for today deals with love, which again may not be obvious in the readings. Recall that last week I alluded to how God's love is a source a joy for us.

Today's gospel reading tells an incredible story. Mary goes to visit Elizabeth, her relative who is pregnant with the son who will become John the Baptist, the one who will prepare the way for Jesus, whom Mary bears, of course. And the Holy Spirit is there. Elizabeth is pregnant after many years of not being able to conceive – so many years that hope was all but gone; Mary, through the power of the Holy Spirit, has conceived a child at a very young age and without knowing a man. And Elizabeth shouts forth in praise and Mary breaks forth in song. What a joyous moment!

Like all Jews, Elizabeth and Mary shared a dream that one day, the Messiah would come, as spoken of by the prophets. Then, the blessing given to Abraham could finally be recognized. But, for this to happen, change must come to the world. And the changes are manifest in Mary's song. According to William Barclay, there are three revolutions described:

- 1) The moral revolution – "He scatters the proud in the plans of their hearts." Christ enables us to see ourselves as we truly are. If we compare ourselves to Christ, we know we must change.
- 2) The social revolution – "He casts down the mighty – he exalts the humble." Christianity abhors labels and the awarding of prestige as in the secular world. Realizing what Jesus did for us makes it impossible for us to feel others are beneath us.
- 3) The economic revolution – "He has filled those who are hungry – those who are rich he has sent away empty." In a truly Christian society, some should not have too much, while others have too little.

The Magnificat, as Mary's song has come to be known, is a beautiful song, but it challenges us in many ways. It is a sobering song, but ultimately it is a song of love – God's love.

Our Presiding Bishop, Michael, in his sermon at the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan quoted these sentiments from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.: "We must discover the power of love, ...the redemptive power of love. And when we do that, ...we will make of this old world a new world, for love is the only way." And in his Christmas message this year, Michael gives us a better understanding of that love.

Michael says:

For years, I've often thought that (the passage from John 3:16 - 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son') only referred to Jesus giving his life as a sacrifice on the cross. And to be sure, that is part of what it means. But some years ago, I was reading a commentary by Raymond Brown, on the Gospel of John, and Professor Brown said that that passage not only speaks of Jesus willingly giving his life on the cross, but it actually speaks of Christmas, of God giving his very self, his very son to the world, not for anything God could get out of it, but for the good and the well-being of the world. Of us.

Someone once said, in a Christmas poem, 'Love came down at Christmas.' That's what love is. To give, and not to count the cost. To give, not for what one can get, but for what the other can receive. That's what love is. God so loved the world, that he gave.

I realized recently how powerful that passage really is when I saw an old poster from 1938. A poster produced by the Episcopal Church at that time, to encourage Episcopalians and other Christians, and other people of faith and good will, to do whatever they could to help Jewish refugees fleeing tyranny in Europe. To help people from all over Europe seeking refuge in America, this land of freedom. The poster depicts Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus. They're fleeing persecution in Palestine, as Matthew's gospel says. And the poster depicting Mary, Joseph, and Jesus says in the tagline, 'In the name of these refugees, help all refugees.' (So pertinent today.)

God so loved the world that he gave, even to the point of risking his own son. And in the name of those refugees, in the name of that Jesus, help all refugees, all people who suffer, anyone who's alone, everyone who is in need. That's what love does.

Love came down at Christmas, because God so loved the world, that he gave.

What a powerful message, particularly at this time in our world.

May we, especially at this time of year, but also through all the coming days, understand the love of God for us and emulate that love in the world.

In the name of the one God, the Creator, the Word, and the Spirit.

Amen.