

St Margaret's, Ditchling (24.12.16)  
Christmas Midnight

TO US A SON IS GIVEN

Isaiah of Jerusalem, whose words we heard in the first reading lived and spoke eight centuries before Jesus was born. It was a time when Israel was divided. It had been conquered by the Assyrians under their king with the wonderful name of Tiglath-pileser; his methods, though, were brutal, putting even *ISIS* to shame. Living under captivity, like those today who live under the Caliphate, the Israelites were faced with the question of whether God had abandoned his people and his land forever to their enemies. Into this desolate situation the prophet speaks:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.  
...For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. *Isaiah 9.2&6*

It would be 800 years and more before that prophecy was fulfilled, and when that time came it was fulfilled in a way that Isaiah would not have recognised. Isaiah was expecting a king like David, who would restore the fortunes of Israel, not the son of a carpenter, born in a stable, who taught people to forgive their enemies, not to seek revenge upon them. And yet, that carpenter's son, whose birth we celebrate today, *was* the promised Son, the child that *was* born for us; he *is* the light that shines on those in deep darkness guiding their steps into the way of peace. Isaiah's four-fold description fits him perfectly: 'Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'

***Wonderful Counsellor*** A counsellor is a source of wisdom and guidance, and Jesus was certainly that. Wherever he went he taught the people and crowds followed him everywhere. Time and again we read that all who heard him were astonished at his teaching and the authority with which he spoke – they hadn't heard anything like it before. He taught them to call God *Abba*, the intimate family name for Father. *Abba* was love, he said; he wasn't a remote, judging presence, but close, merciful, loving and forgiving. Even those who do not believe accept Jesus as a great moral teacher. As God's wonderful counsellor he needs no outside advice, because his wisdom is from God.

***Mighty God*** Jesus was more than just a wise and holy man; as the author of the Letter to Hebrews said, he bore the stamp of God's very being, the radiance of God's glory. Jesus is the eternal God expressed in human form; he is the human face of God. We read in the OT of God's special concern for the poor, the stranger and those on the edge of society; that concern took flesh in Jesus. Jews did not associate with their neighbours the Samaritans, yet Jesus asked a Samaritan woman for water when he rested near a well. Zacchaeus was despised by his fellow Jews because he collaborated with the Romans, collecting their taxes, yet when Jesus visited Jericho he asked to stay in his house. A woman found in the very act of adultery was about to be stoned, but Jesus forgave her, condemning her accusers as hypocrites. Just as Jesus' words were God's words, so his acts were God's acts and his values are God's values.

***Everlasting Father*** If God is anything he is the source and origin of our being, the One who sustains all creation and gives it life, the everlasting father. The same power was present in Jesus: he calmed storms, he healed the sick, and he fed thousands from a few loaves and fishes. More than this, he raised the dead, restoring a son to his widowed

mother, a young daughter to her father, and Lazarus to his sisters, Mary and Martha. He showed that the love of God and the power of God reached beyond death. In him we are assured that we can trust God with our lives, for, as St Paul said, nothing, not even death, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

*Prince of Peace* For the prophets like Isaiah, peace was more than the absence of war or the continuation of conflict by other means. Peace is the condition in which the whole of creation is able to follow its destiny undisturbed. Justice, that is taking everyone's interests seriously, is the pre-condition for peace. Fighting may have stopped in Aleppo, but there will be no peace until the just grievances of the vanquished as well as of the victors are taken seriously. What we see in Jesus' actions and values is how God takes everyone's interests seriously and makes peace possible, even to the point of self-sacrifice. As we heard in the Letter to Titus, Jesus gave himself for us that we might be redeemed from iniquity and become his people, zealous for good deeds. He is our peace.

The world is still divided as it was in the time of Tiglath-pileser; it feels a much more uncertain place than it did this time last year. For some, especially in Syria and Yemen, it is dark; for others the shadows are forming. We turn away from the poor and the stranger. I find it hard to be optimistic, but I remain hopeful, holding on to the good news that the darkness will never overcome the light of Christ. When the shepherds went to Bethlehem and saw the child, they beheld the light of the world, the One who reveals to us the love of God and shows us the path of peace. He is our hope, and this night in him we rejoice: wonderful counsellor, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace!