

Epiphany

Where is the Child?

Isaiah 60:1-6; Matthew 2:1-12

Desmond Tutu wrote:

“Dear Child of God, I write these words because we all experience sadness, we all come at times to despair, and we all lose hope that the suffering in our lives and in our world will every end. I want to share with you my faith and my understanding that this suffering can be transformed and redeemed. There is no such thing as a totally hopeless case. Our God is an expert at dealing with chaos, with brokenness, with all the worst that we can imagine. God created order out of disorder, cosmos out of chaos, and God can do so always, can do so now – in our personal lives and in our lives as nations, globally. The most unlikely person, the most improbable situation – these are all ‘transfigurable’ – they can be turned into their glorious opposites. Indeed, God is transforming the world now – through us – because God loves us.”ⁱ

The world has been mourning the loss of one of its greatest Christian leaders over these last weeks. This tiny, black South African, prone to prophetic statements and unquenchable laughter. This fireball of a man who faced down his critics and detractors and the complacent and the nervous who wanted to write him off and shut him up. He once said, “I wish I could shut up, but I can’t, and I won’t.”

I remember him at the 2004 General Assembly, where he told us, in the midst of the ongoing heated and polarising debate about human sexuality, that everyone was a child of God, and that there were no outsiders in God’s family, whatever their creed, colour, politics or sexual orientation. I remember him telling us that we were all family, and that we, the followers of this vulnerable God Whose birth we celebrate at Christmas, this vulnerable God in the manger, needs our partnership and our help and our support to bringing about the transforming of the world. This vulnerable, hands-stretching-out God calling to us, ‘Help Me, help me, help me.’

Even when we are afraid of Covid, and its effects not only on physical health but mental health and economic health and community health and charity health and church health, God calls us

to be courageous. This God Who at the beginning of a New Year shrouded still in restriction and frustration and resentment reminding us that to be courageous does not mean never to be scared but means acting as though we know we must for the betterment of our world, even though underneath we are afraid. Remember that we are in the hands, still, of a loving, compassionate, caring God, and that nothing will happen to us that God cannot handle.

This little God in a house, illuminated by a shining, moving star, that led the wise on a journey to find the one Who was born to be King. 'Where is the child?', they asked. Where is the boy who, in the mystical, pre-science thinking of their day, was foretold by a star moving through the heavens? A symbol of searching brightness, that inspired the wise, and the faithful, and the scheming and the cruel, to begin a search to find him. The one prophets foretold.

Desmond Tutu searched for Jesus all his life. And when he found Him, he shared Him. And he went on searching because He knew that ours is not a static Saviour, but a mobile Messiah, calling us to follow, sending us out to tell. He knew that Jesus was to be discovered and re-discovered in all the likely and unlikely places of the world. Amongst all the likely and unlikely people of the world.

"Where is the Child?" Have we found Him, yet? Have we seen Him, listened to Him, believed in Him, followed Him?

In recent weeks leaders around the world have started to get religion. Her Majesty the Queen, who has always had religion, spoke movingly about her deep-down faith that has underwritten her entire life of service to nation and commonwealth. She talked about the ability of Christmas to speak to the child within us all. In the birth of the Christ-child, there is a new dawn with endless potential. When you search for the child, you find the new dawn, the endless potential.

Even the Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, *even*, talked in his pre-Christmas message of the need to remember Jesus telling us to love our neighbours. I confess I was rather remembering Jesus telling us about the need to love our enemies but then I'm a cynical old minister. When you search for the child, you find His requirement that we love our enemies, as well as loving our neighbours as ourselves.

“Where is the child?” Herod, the earthly king of the Jews, searched and did not find Him, and slaughtered innocents who might have numbered amongst them this potential threat. He did not find the child. The Wise Men, with their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh searched, led by the symbolic star that spoke of guiding light, followed, and found the child. They entered the house, and saw the child with Mary, and offered their gifts, and worshipped Him. These men of different race and religion find the child, and we are made to realise that at the beginning of His life, Jesus has come to make known the truth and glory of God, not to some little exclusive group but for all and to all, regardless of caste and race and religion and culture.ⁱⁱ

“Where is the child?” Once again, I ask you to come up to the choir area after the service, and look at the magnificent Burne Jones window, and on the left hand side, in the Matthew segment of the window, see the depiction of Jesus and Mary, with the Wise Men kneeling in worship. There for us every Sunday of the year. We are fortunate we do not have to go far to find the child, for there He is, for all to see.

In a few moments we will hear that lovely anthem, *The Three Kings*, by Cornelius, that reminds us:

*Thou Child of man, lo, to Bethlehem
The Kings are travelling, travel with them!
The star of mercy, the star of grace,
Shall lead thy heart to its resting place.
Gold, incense, myrrh thou canst not bring;
Offer thy heart to the infant King.*

“Where is the child?” He’s right here. Not simply depicted in stained glass or the music of a song. He’s right here in the people who gather to worship in this Church, and who watch online. We find the child in the hopes and fears and endless possibilities of those around us, and in ourselves. We are all bound together in what the Bible calls ‘the bundle of life’.ⁱⁱⁱ We are bound together in the same swaddling cloths that bound Jesus. We are part of the Christmas story, and the Epiphany story, because we are, together, part of Him and He of us.

At the beginning of this New Year, who knows what the months will bring. Who knows what will be lost, and found; what will be discovered and rediscovered? But we, here today, are amongst the blessed. Because we are with the ones who have been seeking for the child, and they have found Him! We are here because when they found Him, they told others, in time, about

Him. Shepherds and wise men. Angels and fishermen. Tax collectors and women with no names. The cast list of scripture is full of people who found the child, and shared Him with us, so that we might share Him with others. Passing on the hope. Passing on the light. Passing on the good news. In this we help Jesus, Who will continue to need our help in 2022.

One of my favourite Desmond Tutu stories speaks about this lost and found Jesus, Who still needs our help today. Let it be your resolution this New Year.

“There is a church in Rome with a statue of a Christ without arms. When you ask why, you are told that it shows how God relies on us, His human partners, to do His work for Him. Without us, God has no eyes, without us, God has no ears, without us, God has no arms. God waits upon us, and relies on us.”^{iv}

“Where is the child?” Right here, right there, right now. When we find Him, we find ourselves. When we find Him, we find the work of our lives.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen

ⁱ Desmond Tutu, God has a Dream, pps vii-viii

ⁱⁱ Leith Fisher, But I say to you, p14

ⁱⁱⁱ I Samuel 25:29

^{iv} Tutu, p60