



The Fullness of Time

An address for the Christmas Eve Midnight Mass
24th December 2008 ● Rev Heather

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, thou hast increased its joy; they rejoice before thee as with joy at the harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 9:2-3, 6-7

The heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is the owner of all the estate; but he is under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; when we were children, we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe. But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his son into our hearts crying, "Abba! Father!" So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.

Galatians 4:1-7

We have been waiting for this night. Throughout Advent, we have anticipated its coming. Sometimes in stillness, and sometimes in the midst of busyness, we have waited. And we have had glimpses, hints, promises of newness, promises of our becoming what it is possible for us to be. Now this holy night has come, this night that speaks of wholeness for us and for the world. The night of mystery and of joy is here. And we have come to experience its wholemaking power in us.

This is the night when we celebrate the fulfillment of a promise. When someone makes a promise, an expectation rises up in us. Our imagination creates a picture of a new reality. We hold this within us as we wait for it to be realised. The time that passes between a promise and its fulfillment is often a bit chaotic as far as our thoughts and feelings are concerned. At one moment we may be buoyed up with the picture of what is coming. At other times we may be overcome with doubt that it will ever happen, or with impatience that it is taking so long.

The Promise Given

All of these things were experienced by the people of God through the ages, as they waited for the coming of Christ, the Promised One. That promise is embedded deep within our

human consciousness. Back in the mists of the past, it was made to Adam and Eve in the story of the Garden of Eden.

Adam and Eve exerted their independence of God by eating the forbidden fruit, which is a picture of human beings beginning to become conscious. With the gaining of consciousness came loss of awareness of the spiritual world – Adam and Eve were turned out of the Garden to toil for a living, to focus upon the material world.

At that time, a promise was made that one would come through whom our relationship with the gods would be restored. We would walk and talk with God in innocence of being once again. We understand that this promise refers to the coming of Christ into our world. So a promise was embedded in human consciousness that one day God would send a saviour, one who could make us whole.

Alexander Pope wrote the famous line: *Hope springs eternal in the human breast*. There is something within humanity that enables us to have hope, to picture a different future, to picture ourselves as we could be. Maybe the promise given so long ago is the source of the eternal spring of hopefulness that is a characteristic of human beings.

The hope was given voice through the ages. In Old Testament times it was wonderfully expressed in the vision of the prophet Isaiah that was read earlier – *the people that walked in darkness have seen a great light*. When the people of Israel faced drought or war, or invasion, or oppression, or corrupt rulers or religious leaders, as they did many times, many of them despaired and saw themselves as forsaken by God. Then prophets like Isaiah would come forward to bring hope alive again within them. For centuries this happened – a cycle of hope and despair, of faith and uncertainty.

Eventually there came a time when the prophet's voice was no longer heard. It is hard to keep hope alive when there is nothing outside of you to support you, and you have to draw all your strength from within, but a faithful few did this. There is always a faithful few. Burning in their hearts and minds was the promise that one would come who would bring life and light to the world. We say, "While there's life, there's hope". We could just as well say, "Where there's hope, there's life."

We are not so unlike those people of old. Deep within our consciousness is the promise that we can be like gods once more. At times, we have great hope of that outcome. At other times we despair of ever changing. Then something may happen. Perhaps we hear someone speak, or read a book or in some other way the memory of the promise of what we can be is stirred, and the little embers of hope are fanned into life again. We say, "Yes. Christ in me is the hope of glory."

Hope is not fantasy. It is imagining the real. Christmas Eve speaks to us of a promise made and of a hope that sustains until it is fulfilled. So it was for the Hebrew people. So it is for us.

The Fullness of Time

When we measure time with calendars and clocks and other devices, it is as a linear, chronological thing, where moment follows moment in a regular pattern. Yet our experience of time is different from that. Time may pass quickly or slowly. It may be full or empty. It moves with a rhythm, like the waves swelling and breaking, swelling and breaking. Some moments in life are peak moments; they are like the crest of a wave. They are filled with power and meaning. When these waves break, everything changes. We are not the same people after we have lived through them. They are transforming.

Paul wrote about the greatest of those peak moments in human history when he said: "In the fullness of time, God sent forth his son." Or, as some translations say, "When the time had

fully come, God sent forth his son.” The time for the promise to be fulfilled had come. Everything necessary was in place for this world-changing and person-changing event.

What was so right about this time? From a human point of view, it looks rather disastrous – a couple away from their home, with the birth of a child impending, a stable the only available accommodation, and on the broader scene, a country under the domination of the foreign power of Rome.

It doesn't look like a good time. And yet an intricate interweaving of events both in the heavens and on earth made this the right time, in spite of all these seemingly negative situations.

The timing of our life's events and opportunities is often mysterious. As we look back over our lives we can see how things happened at the right moment, even though it may not have looked to be so from the outside. Sometimes it is only on reflection that this becomes clear to us and we can say with absolute confidence, “It was the right time.” It was a moment when many things came together to enable something new to come forth from us.

The Christmas story tells us that there is another perspective beyond the rational, logical one, and that the timing of the heavens is different from our earthly timing. Some of you will remember that Mario used to tell how as a little boy he would get underneath the tapestry his grandmother was working and was fascinated by all the different threads and their interweaving. We tend to see only the surface picture, not the underside. The heavens have the whole picture.

So that cold night in Bethlehem when the child Jesus was born was absolutely the right time for this event to take place.

The Promise is Fulfilled

There was a promise. There was expectation. And there was the fulfillment of the promise. The shepherds heard the message of the angels: “I bring you good tidings of great joy... for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.” God had kept his promise.

It was indeed good tidings of a great joy. The shepherds found everything as the angel had told them and they went away joyfully to tell those tidings to all who would listen.

Joy has come to the world through this child. Joy has come to us. The Word was becoming flesh, God with us. Tonight we have come to rejoice, to praise, to sing carols, to hear the story once again.

It is not enough if it remains only a story from two thousand years ago. For this was the most momentous event in the history of our world. We can think of many momentous events in history, but none has the power to continue to change the world as did the birth of Jesus and the uniting of this human being with the Sun Spirit from the heavens.

Advent has been a time of yearning, of hoping, of opening ourselves to the possibility of newness. We have looked forward to this holy night when we celebrate that this newness is here, that it is in us. We do not have to wait as they did in ancient days for the promise to be fulfilled. Now is the day of salvation. The Promised One has come.

The Bethlehem child lives in us – that open, trusting part of us through which the Christ can work.

Tonight, then, is joy – joy that comes as a gift of God, not something we have to manufacture. It springs up within us. And it is important that we don't suppress it. We do that

sometimes because we are afraid we might be disappointed, and we want to steel ourselves against that. Or we think that we don't deserve to be joyful; we aren't good enough.

Listen again to the angel's message: "I bring **you** good tidings of great joy. Unto **you** is born a saviour."

A promise, a time of expectation, a fulfillment. Christ in you, the hope of glory. Newness. Joy.

In a moment we will listen to a new Christmas song, "The Coming of the Sun Spirit". It is a song of joy, with its echoing refrain of "Gloria". You will find the words towards the end of your Order of Service if you would like to follow them. Lift up your heart and rejoice.

So shall it be.

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