

**A Sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry  
in Coventry Cathedral on Christmas Day 2013**

**Readings: Isaiah 62.6-12; Luke 2.1-20**

**Introduction**

Two headlines from two literary sources, one ancient, one modern:

‘In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria,’ recounts St Luke.

And Friday’s newspaper told us, ‘New Syrian refugee is born every hour’.

**Born at a dangerous place in a dangerous time**

I remember as a child being entranced by the mysterious figure of Quirinius in the exotic sounding land of Syria. It all seemed to come from a very different and distant world. Little did I know that many years later, 2006.

It was a peaceful land then, with good relations between peoples, especially Muslim and Christian but there was a feeling of fragility in the air. The secret police were everywhere, and not very good at being secret; and there were histories of conflict on every side, with Lebanon to the west and Israel to the south, and war-torn Iraq to the East.

Now it has become the most awful war zone of its own, with untold human suffering.

This year I went on a Pilgrimage to the Holy Land. It was the first time that I had visited that extraordinary place. On my first day in Palestine I visited St Ephrem’s school in Bethlehem, a school that this Diocese supports, a school that educates children from the Syrian Orthodox community in Palestine, along with other Christian and Muslim children. It was the morning after the kidnapping of two bishops in Aleppo in North-West Syria. I felt something of the pain

that this Syrian community was experiencing at the suffering of its motherland, and their anxiety for family and friends who lived there.

In a moment of embarrassing innocence borne of a certain ignorance I said to my son who was with me (and who knows the Middle East better than I): why can't they give refuge and safety here to their war-torn compatriots over there? 'Because, Dad', he said, 'Israel and Syria are still officially at war and even if Palestinians tried to go to Syria, they would not be allowed back'. 'In fact, he went on to remind me, 'Palestinians do not even have freedom of travel within their own land'.

I was to discover that too. The first time I visited Jerusalem, our bus was stopped at a check point and two soldiers with guns walked onto the bus, looked at my our passports and then took mine away. I felt angry and humiliated. A few days later I saw the enormous wall that divides Bethlehem from Jerusalem and requires Palestinian inhabitants of Bethlehem to get up at 4.00 in the morning to negotiate their way through. The sight of this great wall of division deeply disturbed me.

Jesus was born into one of the most complex, volatile, dangerous places on earth. That's what it's like now and that what it's been like for most of its history. The Middle East is where the tectonic plates of great empires and political power brokering of vulnerable regimes have rubbed against each other for centuries, with intrigue and violence, danger and death erupting from the collision of ambitions and ideologies. That is the place God choose to dwell among us.

At one of the many Carol services held in this great Cathedral this Christmas a song was sung by a year 10 girl. It was the Bob Dylan song in the version popularized by Adele, 'Make you feel my love'.

*When the rain is blowing in your face  
And the whole world is on your case  
I could offer you a warm embrace  
To make you feel my love*

*I'd go hungry, I'd go black and blue  
And I'd go crawling down the avenue  
No, there's nothing that I wouldn't do  
To make you feel my love*

*There's nothing that I wouldn't do  
Go to the ends of this Earth for you  
To make you feel my love  
To make you feel my love*

That's why the angels sang on the first Christmas morning: 'Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth among those he favours!' – because God has held nothing back, God has come from the glory of the heights of heaven to the ends for us. He has come crawling down the avenue even to the little beleaguered town of Bethlehem – 'to make us feel his love', to offer us the embrace of his grace.

### **Born as a child**

God came not only into the dangerous political cauldron of one of the most dangerous places in the world, he also came into the most vulnerable form of human life – the life of a child.

And this past year has shown us just how dangerous it is to be child even in our own land. We have heard the most appallingly awful stories of child abuse, accounts of the suffering of the innocents that bring humanity to shame:

- from celebrities involved in charity work to priests in churches
- from privileged prep schools to the underside of industrial cities
- from care homes to ordinary homes – even to Coventry, even our own doorstep, with the unbelievably dreadful torture and murder of Daniel Pelka by his parents

we have seen and heard about things that we dare not even imagine.

As well as being moved this year by the Dylan-Adele song, I've been touched by Michael Symmons Roberts' poem in which he imagines, along with many writers and poets over the centuries, Jesus being delivered by one of Bethlehem's midwives – a midwife who knows the divine identity of the child she just hauled into the world.

*My hands have cradled many heads,  
cut countless cords and caul,*

*but never held eternity  
within such fragile walls.*

*The maker of all worlds is made,  
infinity becalms,  
from speed of light to feet of clay,  
my saviour in my arms.*

- ‘Eternity held within the fragile walls of a tiny babe’ - the fragile walls of a tiny babe born homeless.
- ‘From speed of light to feet of clay’ – that child becomes, like the Syrian children born every hour today, a refugee.
- ‘The maker of all worlds is made’ – and then is made to flee from one of the world’s worst child abusers – Herod, king and cruel despot who, St Matthew tells us, ‘searched for the child to destroy him’.

## **Emmanuel – Jesus**

What all this means is summed up in two Hebrew words, both applied to this child by the Bible.

The first is *Emmanuel* – meaning: ‘God is with us’.

God has come to us in Christ; God has been born among us in this child. God knows the personal reality of human life in person; God has even suffered at the lustful ambitions of the abuser and God stands on the side of all those children in this land and in every land who suffer the attacks of wicked and violent people.

God has come to us in Christ: come right into the political, historical, economic conditions of human life: and he has faced the worst. God has come into the Middle East and suffered its volatility. God has become a pawn in the power broking of religious and political leaders. God stands on the side of those who suffer the injustice of oppression and the futility of violence, the devastating disappointments of false promises and the destructive effects of war.

*Emmanuel* – God is present in war-torn Syria, God is present in occupied Palestine, God is present in fearful Israel. God is present with the Palestinian family whose little one was killed yesterday and God is present with the Jewish family of whose father was murdered while I was in the Holy Land.

God is present in Coventry, still struggling from the recession – or wherever you find your home, and whatever its problems.

God is present in your family, whatever its pressures.

God is present in your life, whatever you feel about him.

God is ready to enter into your heart and live in your life.

The second Hebrew word in the Christmas tells us what the presence of God does in any situation – it is the first name of the child of Bethlehem: *Ye'shua* – *Jesus*, meaning, 'God saves'.

When God comes among us, God comes to change our situations, to transform them. God comes to save.

'See your salvation comes', says the prophet as we heard earlier.

God can still save Israel and Palestine and Syria and Afghanistan and the Central Republic of Africa and all the other places torn apart by violence. But God only saves by the way of Jesus:

- the way of repentance not retaliation
- the way of reconciliation and not revenge;
- the way of healing and not hurt
- the way of forgiveness and not vendetta
- the way of justice and not oppression
- the way of peace and not war
- the way that saves the nations of the earth from their sins by turning their hearts to the wisdom of the just and ways of righteousness.

God can still save me and you from whatever conditions in life are threatening us but God only saves by the way of Jesus

- the way that calls us to turn from ourselves and our own self-sufficiency and turn to Christ
- the way that calls us to trust no longer in our own powers to sort out our lives and save ourselves and our families but to trust to God in sort us and to save us

- the way that calls us to come to God with open hands and open hearts and open minds to believe that there is nothing that God would not do for us to feel his love
- the way that God invites us to be re-born, born again, born to a second birth through God's love
- the way that invites us to join with Jesus in his revolution of love and his way of peace and forgiveness, healing and hope, love and mercy.

## Conclusion

*O holy Child of Bethlehem  
Descend to us, we pray  
Cast out our sin and enter in  
Be born to us today  
We hear the Christmas angels  
The great glad tidings tell  
O come to us, abide with us  
Our Lord Emmanuel*

May that be our prayer as well as our song this Christmas.