

Just before Christmas, the world mourned the passing of Nelson Mandela, a figure who became synonymous with the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. In the course of the celebrations of his life we saw once more another of those iconic characters, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who continues, even in his old age to be a thorn in the side of those in power in South Africa. Periodically I find myself returning to some of his writings. This morning, on this Sunday after Christmas, I want to begin with words from a sermon he preached in Johannesburg Cathedral in the early 1980's. Words that form the basis of what lay behind his passion for justice and human rights in his native South Africa.

The God whom we worship is wonderfully transcendent – St John in his Gospel sums it all up by saying 'God is Spirit'. Yet when this God wanted to intervene decisively in the affairs of man, he did not come as a spiritual being. He did not come as an angel. No, he became a human being. He came in a really human and physical way – his mother became pregnant, and he was born a helpless baby, depending on mother and father for protection, for food, for love and teaching. When they looked for him in the houses of the kings and the high and mighty, he was born in a stable, as one of the lowly and despised. He worked as a village carpenter, knowing what it meant for his mother to lose a coin, to sweep out the house diligently by candle light until she found the lost coin and rejoiced at the finding.

Desmond Tutu in 'Crying in the Wilderness'

One of the messages that I take away from Christmas is that God has sat where I sit in the person of Jesus Christ. He really does know what it is like to be human. We see from our lessons and from these words of Desmond Tutu that this identification with humanity is part and parcel of the nature of the God we worship, revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Our Old Testament Lesson comes from near the end of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. These closing chapters contain many vigorous statements of judgement and redemption. These words were written in a time of great expectation. The period of the exile was over, the Temple was about to be rebuilt. There was even a thought around that the King at that time, Zerubbabel, was the expected Messiah. But a line of thought is beginning to emerge that God's deliverance will not be in military terms, we begin to see an understanding of a

suffering Messiah. In our Old Testament Lesson, the prophet declares God's word to his people. "In all their affliction, he was afflicted in his love and pity he redeemed them."

We get a vision of a God who is not aloof from his people, a God who identifies with them, who is hurt by their hurts. It is this same God who promises to redeem. This is a theme that is further developed in our lesson from the letter to the Hebrews. In this we are told of Jesus' identification with the world he came to save. Made to be like us in every way so that he could make atonement for the sins of the people. In other words, to be Saviour, Jesus had to sit where I have sat. He has known temptation, rejection, he has known loneliness and fear, suffering and death itself. Because he has sat where I have sat, because I know he knows the frailty of my human nature, I know I can find in him real strength and real comfort.

I am left with this lovely picture of God becoming like me in my humanity in order that I might become more like him. But that is absurd - me like God? But then I remember that that is what I was always intended to be, made in the image of God, made for fellowship with God. In this child, born in a manger, we find our way back to God.

Our Lesson from St Matthew's Gospel gives the harrowing story of the slaughter of the innocents. Herod is so determined to remove all threats to his power that after hearing the wise men's talk of a King born in Bethlehem, that he orders the murder of all male children under the age of two. This is a story that reminds me how far this world is from God. It is also a reminder that not everyone will be sharing with us in our search. The wise men sought Jesus in order to worship him. Herod sought the same Jesus in order to destroy him. As Desmond Tutu and many like him have discovered, the message of the Christ child is frequently not welcome in the corridors of power and influence. There will also be those who will undermine us in our search for Christ. Friends, loved ones, those we respect who may feel threatened in themselves by our attachment to Jesus. They may not, like Herod, seek to kill the child but they don't want him around.

But Jesus is with me even in this. He himself found misunderstanding from those he loved. We read in St Mark's Gospel that near the beginning of his ministry that at one point his own family thought he was mad and sought to protect him from himself. (Mark 3:21)

We are about to enter upon a New Year with all its opportunities and challenges. For some this will mean a change in school, others will be facing major exams. Some will be getting married, others will be having children. For many there is an uncertainty, maybe even fear as to what this new year will bring.

We finished this year on a note of relative optimism as we have watched the troika depart our shores but our problems are far from over. For many, too many, of our people there is continuing uncertainty over employment, over debt. We are certainly beginning to see significant growth in some sectors such as IT and there are signs of a recovery in the housing market, at least in this part of the world. But this in itself is presenting questions to us as we emerge from our troubles. What sort of society do we want to see developing over the next few years. Are we going to go for the short term interests of our own particular sector of society or are we going to seek the long term interest of our whole society, including the weak and those on the edges of society? Or will we revert to the excesses of the Celtic Tiger years which saw some do very well and left others relatively untouched on the margins of our society.

Jesus promised his followers that he would be with them at all times. In all the problems, in all the choices they would make not only for themselves but also for their communities. He is there as one who really knows me, who knows how difficult it is at times to be me. There not only as one who really knows me but also as one who has redeemed me, who in arms stretched out on the Cross has shown me the way back.

May this coming New Year be one in which we know Christ's presence with us in whatever lies ahead, one in which we all find peace in his presence and strength to face whatever may come our way.