

In the study at home I have a book by Desmond Tutu, that remarkable man who found himself as Bishop of Johannesburg and Archbishop of Capretown in South Africa in those crucial years of the end of apartheid and the beginning of new era in South Africa. He always reminded me of the Old Testament prophet who spoke truth to power. he was a thorn in the flesh of the white governments and has continued to be a thorn in the flesh for ANC governments. I just want to begin this morning 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 loose 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.

In our lessons over the Christmas period, in these words from Desmond Tutu, 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 runs through 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. In the lesson this morning from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, we are called to model something of that sacrificial, self emptying love in our own life and witness.

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)

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.