

GOD OF LOVE

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news...

This, I think, is one of the best pictures in the Bible – a messenger hastening over the mountains with lightness in his step because he brings good news. His feet are beautiful on the mountains simply because of the good news he carries! This speaks to us particularly because good news is in short supply these days as the Covid-19 pandemic tightens its grip bringing in its train anxiety, depression – both mental and economic – and many more deaths than normal. And this on top of all the other problems that beset the world, from lorries queuing at Dover to refugees fleeing conflict and deprivation to the growing gap between rich and poor, and climate change. I think many of us wonder, in the back of our minds where we are going; where will it end? What will the ‘new normal’ be like? And some may wonder, too Where is God? Doesn’t he care for us?

Christmas is his assurance that he does care, and that in his love we can find the way that leads to a better world, to a new normal that works fairly for everyone. Some years ago, I took a funeral just before Christmas. The music included a song, *The Rope of Love*, written by Donald Swan. It was inspired by the belief of the Hopi Indians that faith has many strands like a rope, and that each religion holds one strand in the rope. I said that I hoped the strand that the Christians were holding was that God *is* love. That *is* the good news of Christmas.

What does love mean? Not just warm feelings, or affection, but something deeper, and willed: caring, holding, forgiving, wanting the

best for others, putting their needs first, and being willing to suffer for the beloved. We have seen many examples of this kind of love as this pandemic has progressed: the many thousands who have put themselves on the line caring for the desperately ill, supporting the housebound and those at risk – a huge army of key workers, mostly low paid, on whom we have come to depend. And then, of course, the researchers who have worked tirelessly to develop a vaccine in record time. In so many ways we have seen how God is with us through the loving actions of those who have become neighbours to those in need.

In our own times, we have seen the fulfilment of the good news that Isaiah's messenger announced: that God loved his people, and would come among them. We believe that he came among us in Jesus, and that Jesus shows us God's nature of love, which we see reflected in the countless acts of loving service on which we depend, and for which we give thanks.

Jesus reveals the almighty, eternal God in a way that we humans can understand. The God whom he reveals is not a remote, demanding presence hurling down thunderbolts – a god of might, fury and vengeance – but one who is close to us, working for our good, bearing our failures and our suffering – a God of love, mercy and compassion. And when he revealed himself in human form, he did so as a child drawing a response out of love, not as a mighty Lord demanding obedience out of fear.

More than that, in Jesus God placed himself particularly alongside the poor and the vulnerable. Jesus was born in poverty; he grew up in an ordinary family who lived in a poor village. The first to hear the good news of his birth were shepherds out in the fields – in those days a despised occupation. Jesus was born in a stable excluded from the

comfort of the inn; his bed is a manger, not a cradle. God's special concern is for those on the outside, those who feel excluded and whose needs go unmet in a disordered world. In Jesus God shows that his love reaches out to everyone, overcoming the barriers that keep people apart: race, status, and gender. Isaiah's picture of God coming to comfort his people and reign among them, was fulfilled in Jesus.

It's a picture that we need to take to heart, because it's important to get our picture of God right. This is especially so now in times when being clear about matters of faith and belief is essential to laying hold of our hope, and finding a new normal that can overcome the disorder of the world. There is only one God, but not all our pictures of him are the same, and behind the events in Yemen and Afghanistan, in Syria and Iraq, is the clash of these different pictures of God – clearly some believe that God permits murder, rape, slavery... Some people say it doesn't matter what you believe, faith is a private matter; but clearly it does matter what you believe, and it has an effect far outside our personal lives. We need to hold firm to our strand of the rope. It is, I believe, the strongest strand: the Christ-like God, the God of love, offers our best hope – for ourselves and for the world – as we shape the new normal. Today we rejoice that he came among us, full of grace and truth, and *all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.*