

Christmas Day 25.12.25

Isaiah 52: 7-10; Hebrews 1:1-14

The Christian faith is unique amongst the world religions. That is a bold claim, some would say as arrogant claim. Yet it is the claim of the writer to the Hebrews in this morning's epistle. Even the Jewish faith is fragmentary in comparison with Christianity. This great gulf between other religions and Christianity stems from our understanding of God. Other faiths describe our attempts to find God as like a ladder. All you have to do is to make the effort and you will find God. Christians, on the other hand, assert that God is completely unapproachable. Our own efforts will only lead us into thick darkness. Yet this morning's reading from the Letter to the Hebrews gives us hope, for it declares how it was God's will to reveal himself to us. God has spoken.

First of all, in former times God spoke to the Jews in a fragmentary and varied fashion, through the prophets. The earlier stages of revelation were in varied ways. He spoke in storms and thunder to Moses, in a still small voice to Elijah. Priests and prophets, sages and singers were in various ways his spokespersons, yet all the various acts of revelation and each of the varied people gave a limited message. They pointed beyond themselves to another in whom would be the fulness of God's revelation. The way in which the Jewish people came to know God is a long and complex story.

In our first reading this morning we came into contact with the greatest Prophet in the Old Testament, Isaiah. He lived at a time of great change in the Middle East. At that time in 722 BC there were two lands that you may have heard of: Israel and Judah. Earlier they had been one country, then in 931 BC they split apart. The northern group became Israel. Sadly, 20 kings ruled the North and 12 of them were wicked. The country was overrun by the Assyrian King in 722 BC. Despite the Jews being sent into exile the words of the prophet Isaiah give them tremendous hope. It is he who we heard talking about beautiful mountains and how in the future not only the people of Israel, but all the ends of the world will see the salvation of our God.

We now leap almost 800 years and Jesus has come to this earth in Israel. He has made clear the power and the love of God and the news of this has got as far as a group called the Hebrews. They were a group of first-century Christians who were in danger of giving up. No wonder what is clear is that they had experienced some persecution for their Christian faith, possibly for refusing to worship state gods without having the Jewish roots that would make this refusal acceptable to local state officials. The author is urging his readers to remain true to their Christian commitments: God will reward them in the end, when Jesus returns in judgment, and if they abandon him that would not be a good thing. The reading we just heard points out two important things:

- Christ is superior to the Old Testament prophets (Heb 1:1-3). The Jewish prophets were God's spokespersons in former times, but now he has spoken through his own Son, the perfect image of God himself.
- Christ is superior to the angels (Heb 1:4-11; 2:5-18). The angels mentioned in the Old Testament are God's messengers par excellence, but Christ is his very Son, exalted to a

position of power next to God's heavenly throne. Angels are ministers for those destined for salvation, but Christ is the Son of God, whose suffering actually brought this salvation to humanity.

The Gospel according to St John is a much easier book for us to understand and enjoy. Unlike the letter to the Hebrews, which was a bit difficult to understand, it is like going back years ago when we were walking into the church and would meet people we had known for years. As we sat down in our pew, and listened to the unforgettable opening words, "In the beginning ..." we knew at once that we were entering a place both familiar and strange. In the beginning was the Word - every Bible reader could see that phrase at once recalls the start of Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament ("In the beginning...").

In John's gospel it is the beginning of a new story of God and the world, not just about one man in one place and time. It is about a radical change that has changed, and will continue to change the world. Those who believe in Jesus have changed and will continue to change the world. Simply because "the Word became flesh and lived amongst us".