

## Seeing the Signs of God's Presence in a Difficult Year 24 December 2020

Reading: Luke 2:1-14

Faithful God, on this holy night fill my words and our hearts with your love.  
In Jesus name.  
Amen

Verse 12 of our reading says "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

There are lots of signs that Christmas is here. One was a phone call I received. "Is that St Nicholas?" the caller asked. My name of course is Nicholas, so I really thought she was onto something. It turned out she lived in Barrington Street and wanted St Nicholas, the church. "How did you get my number?" I asked, "Oh when I said I wanted to talk to St Nicholas they gave me your number."

St Nicholas, the man, has become a sign of Christmas. He was the very first Father Christmas.

I knew that St Nicholas was a 4th century bishop who gave his life and money serving the poor. What I didn't know was that his life was hugely affected by the COVID of his day. His parents died in a pandemic when he was very young. I wonder how much living through a pandemic changed Nicholas into the generous caring man he became.

As we reflect on the year that has been I wonder how we have been changed by living through a pandemic?

The first to hear the message of Christ's birth wasn't St Nicholas but some shepherds. The shepherds are given very clear instructions on what sign to look for. In verse 12 the angels say to them, "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

The baby Jesus was to be for them the sign that God was with them. In such a year as we have had have there been signs that God is with us?

Well despite the lockdown or maybe because of it we discovered how important our church and more especially our faith is. With the help of Ethan and Rosemary and David Winfield we managed to keep worship going over YouTube. Much to my surprise we had an enormous following. People from all over the world tuned in, some in their PJs, some with their dogs and budgerigars, some of them relatives I had forgotten and some of them friends I never had. A new community emerged with people chatting to each other. We are still getting cards thanking us for the lockdown services. God is always finding new ways to communicate love to us and internet worship became for us a sign that God was with us.

Despite what we might have thought, the preschool grew over this last year. Over 30 children are now part of the preschool family and importantly for us they have begun to join our church family. One little boy joined just last week. The family explained they had no clue as to the meaning of Christmas but wanted him to learn and thought the preschool was the place to find out. God is always renewing our community with fresh people and the growing preschool has been a sign that God is with us.

Once we have got over lockdown the restored and expanded St Peter's Church will be finished and opened on the 28th of February. We aren't restoring the church begun in 1858 because we need to get out of the hall and we are sick of moving chairs (though we really are!) Rather we are restoring the church so that it can be a sign of hope to the community. It is a sign that at the heart of one of the busiest corners in Christchurch is a sacred place: a place of prayer, a place of peace, the hub of a community that cares and proclaims to all that are passing, "God is with us". The restored St Peter's church is a sign that God is with us.

People's lives too have been changed this year for the better. Some of us witnessed Becky's and Indie's baptisms. Becky's testimony was incredibly moving. She is a young woman emerging from a very dark place including drugs. Because of God's grace and the people of this place she has turned a corner. How astonishing when I asked her "What can we do for you?" Holding back tears she simply answered "You are doing it already. You are my family."

God is constantly transforming our lives for the better and this a sign that God is with us.

When Anglican Care asked if we wanted to be a part of visiting our neighbourhood, I was hesitant. I really wondered if we had the people. But the Care Bears stepped up and we knocked on the doors of over 500 houses in the most deprived area of the parish. We went with a simple question. "How are you? "After the year we have had, how are you?" We had light bulbs and budgeting advice and mental health guidance to offer, but really the most important thing was just to show that we cared. A strange thing happened that week. We discovered that we ourselves can be a sign of God's presence. God is always gently drawing us into deeper care for our neighbour, so the door knocking was a sign that God is with us.

A long time ago a child was born to us. A child that would grow and live and die and rise again to bring us God's love. Jesus was God's sign, God's sacrament that God is with us.

The good news of Christmas is that God is with us still, restoring, renewing, transforming. On the journey of this year we have discovered, as St Nicholas did, that there is nothing that can separate us from God's love, not even a pandemic.