

John 1:1-14

The turn of another year always brings mixed emotions. For some it feels like closing the door to the past year, and sometimes that feeling of leaving behind those who are no longer with us. But also standing at the door way of a whole new year, perhaps a degree of uncertainty, maybe even apprehension, or excitement – a whole new chapter. We need an angel announcing good news, but also proclaiming, as they always do “do not be afraid!”

2016 will be remembered for some major changes in the world, not least Brexit, Trump, Russia, Syria and the ongoing battle with Islamic Terrorism following attacks in Belgium, France and Germany – It’s been a year in which fascism, xenophobia, extremism and terrorism divided and threatened the world – from the USA, throughout Europe, the Middle East and beyond. There’s no doubt that as we enter a new year, the world is a very fragile place.

This has been a year in which expectations were upended. The world of politics was turned upside down and no-one really knows what is coming next. And it’s not surprising that many feel anxious about the future.

Looking back at the Bethlehem story this year, behind the tinsel and glitter, there are all too familiar stories. Whether it’s the beginning of the story where people were demanded to return to their own towns across the empire in order to be registered – I usually imagine that in much the same way I think of our own censuses that take place every 10 years. Just a way of counting people so that services can be provided.

But this year, it’s difficult not to think of the recent political promise on the other side of the Atlantic to insist that all Muslims should be registered and accounted for.

Or the story of Mary and Joseph fleeing for their lives and seeking a safe haven in Egypt – seeking asylum from a despot king, a tyrant leader. And Herod’s massacre of the children – not so far removed from some of the scenes we’ve witnessed from Aleppo.

The Christmas Story happened when Big Men ruled the world - Emperor Augustus; Quirinius the Governor of Syria; and King Herod. There is no avoiding the reality that God came into the world when big men were in charge - or thought they were in charge, and had no intention of losing their power to anyone.

There are all kinds of things that are part of the Christmas tradition that have little or no mention in Scriptures.

There's no ox and ass lowing in the bible stories.

There's no certainty that there were only three wise men who visited from the East and no mention of them being kings, and no mention of a stable – it was a house where the wise men met with the Christ Child.

The manger and the straw and even the date of the birth, which seem so much a part of the story are not there when we look for them in the bible – The earliest Gospel, Mark's Gospel makes no references to any of the details, and neither does John.

But what is there is that God chose to come into a world where big men were in charge.

It feels today as though Big Men with an unhealthy interest in power are taking over again.

But Herod didn't manage to kill the Christ child; he didn't manage to kill hope, and didn't manage to wipe out love.

And neither will Trump, nor Putin, nor anyone else. No matter how the world changes, the message we read in Scripture does not change.

I follow the lectionary, and every year we go round and round hearing the same stories at the same time of the year – and personally, I find that a wonderful and reassuring thing in a fast changing world.

Those opening words from John's Gospel bring us right round to what comes at the beginning, that which is foundational for us, that which cannot be argued with because it has always been so and always will be so.

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God.

A great deal has been written about the effect of Jesus's life, death and resurrection. People have debated, argued, even warred with one another over what we understand about the effect of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

But before that, in the beginning. before disagreement, before war, before strife, there was God.

And God looked at this world and loved it and wanted to be part of it.

Before the world began, this much was true – that God was there and God had compassion and God was love.

Before the world began, before any darkness, God was there and God brought life and light and truth.

A few years ago, one of the ladies in my last charge announced in the Autumn that she was going to knit the Christmas story – and she did. We were presented

with a whole crib scene made of knitting figures for the church. A knitted Mary, a knitted Joseph, knitted Magi and shepherds and sheep, and a knitted Jesus.

And they take pride of place at the front of the church and the children and everyone who is young at heart is welcome to pick up the characters and think about what they represent.

To hold Mary and ponder what it meant to bring to birth the creator of the universe who already loved us.

To take up Joseph and wonder what was going through his head as he stood by Mary – the mystery of the story and his compassion, kindness, love and trust.

To gather up the shepherds and encounter those whom the world might least expect to receive a revelation from an angel, let alone an invitation to be there at that time.

To take up the strange Magi, knitted robes and knitted beards and knitted gifts and reflect on the fact that God's love seem extend to the kosher and non kosher worshippers alike, and to know that those outside our own definitions of belonging are already known and loved by God.

To take up and cradle in the palm of your hand and hold the Christ child who once cradled the dawn of time in his.

For in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God.

Every year I wonder how to say something new about the Christmas story.

Every year, I eventually come to the conclusion that the only thing to do is to let the original story stand on its own two feet.

For in the beginning God was.

In the beginning God came.

In the beginning God loved.

And we are who we are because of it.

The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

And nothing will change that. Not Brexit, not a new President in the USA, not the fear of terrorism, or the atrocities in Syria. Not Russia flexing its muscles, (and quoting from Romans 8 in the call to prayer) neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord,

Because

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.”

Amen.