

## Sermon: St Andrew's, Corbridge: Advent 4 2018, Evening Prayer

Text: Psalm 85  
Theme: The Embrace

Christmas is very near. And Christmas is an annual reminder that God is near, that salvation is near, that hope is near. The voice of Christmas invites us to see the circumstances of our lives, our nation, our world, from the perspective of what God has done in Christ, what he is doing in Christ, and what he will do in Christ.

Psalm 85 is my favourite Psalm from the whole Psalter. We read it with special meaning at Christmas. The first half of the Psalm is a plea for salvation – a cry for God to act, to restore, to save. And the second half, from verse 8, is the divine response. It is the second half I want us to consider tonight.

It begins with a creative act of listening. 'I will listen to what the Lord God will say'. The Psalmist becomes attuned to the voice of God - and the voice he hears says *Shalom*: a word of peace is coming, lest the people persist in their folly and thwart the purposes of God. And as the Psalmist listens, he hears that God's salvation is not far away but near – 'that glory may dwell in our land': the glory of the Lord's presence rather than his seeming absence.

And then there is that wonderfully moving personification:

*Mercy and truth are met together;  
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.*

The language is intimate; the wondrous embrace of God's graciousness:

- Mercy: *hesed*: steadfast love, kindness, covenant faithfulness, loyalty
- Truth: *emet*: divine wisdom, creativity, dependability
- Righteousness: *sedeq*: deliverance, victory, healing
- Peace: *shalom*: well-being, right relationships, integration.

Mercy and truth, as it were, fall for each other like lovers; righteousness and peace kiss each other - as in an act of spontaneous joy.

And the result of this embrace? Truth flourishes out of the earth; like spring time flowers that turn December into May; righteousness looks down from heaven, it leans out, cranes forward; the re-vitalised earth strains upwards, and heaven bends downwards – reaching out to embrace each other. The Lord's loving kindness is revealed, the land becomes fruitful; and righteousness comes in stately procession, creating a path for the Lord's feet.

In other words, this is cosmic optimism big style, but in the context of such bleakness as the first half of the Psalm reflects human longings, pain and loss. No wonder, therefore, when we read this Psalm with Christian eyes, we see in it a devotional resonance with the mystery of the Incarnation. We know, of course, that this is a Christian interpretation: something we are bringing to the text and something the Holy Spirit reveals to us. This is what Fr George Guiver of Mirfield, calls 'serious game', something in which we use our imagination to see in the text a principle, a hope, a possibility, which we find fulfilled in Christ.

So our Christmas gospel proclaims a God who is gracious to our land; who, in Christ, brings us into an experience of forgiveness and life; who leads us into truth. A God whose glory is seen tangibly and fully in the Word made flesh, who comes to dwell in our land, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. It proclaims a gift in Christ where truly mercy and truth fall into each other's arms and righteousness and peace embrace and kiss; where heaven bends down to earth and earth reaches up to touch heaven.

And because in this human being, Jesus Christ, mercy and truth, righteousness and peace, are found united and reconciled, and in harmony one with another, therefore all the discordant and contradictory parts of our human nature, all our dis-integration, all our conflicts and dis-eases find resolution in him. And because he is of us, and we are of him, our humanity is being re-made and re-integrated and reconciled.

And with regard to our fallen and uneasy world, all that human sin and wickedness, evil and madness, is judged and dealt with within his own body, through costly incarnation and even more costly atonement through the blood of his Cross. So that the possibility of a new humanity and a new creation is set before us. And the struggle we are engaged in to realize this new creation is in the context of a final outcome that has already been fulfilled in the flesh of Christ himself, whose resurrection we celebrate on this first day of the week.

And that is why, I, we, shall pray for grace still to look on the world with clear sight, and engage in Christian living and in prayer with its pain, its injustice, its evils, its hurts, while working with Christ for transformation by the power of the gospel. Simply because mercy and truth, righteousness and peace, have embraced and will embrace the whole of creation in God's day. And that is why, my brothers and sisters, on this 23<sup>rd</sup> of December, despite acts of atrocity, fanaticism, violence, oppression, and countless individual hurts and tragedies, I too can declare that I remain, along with an accurate realism, a man of hope, and even, but only because of Christ and Christ alone, a cosmic optimist.

*Mercy and truth are met together;  
righteousness and peace have kissed each other.*

That is why tonight, we have hope.