

God's message

This is the third Christmas I've been here at St Ives Uniting. And it's the third time I've retrieved our nativity scene from the attic – and I have to tell you actually getting the figures out of the loft is not one of my favourite things to do. It's hot and stuffy up there. The figures are wrapped in plastic bags, but the plastic bags have a layer of dust on them. And it's awkward to get the seven large figures and the manger through the door of the loft, down the ladder, up the stairs and into the church.

At Pymble Chapel, I used to set up the nativity scene each year, but that only involved getting a box out of the cupboard and putting the figures on the table.

Setting up the scene here at St Ives is a much greater undertaking!

But each time I've got them out, I've continued to be amazed by them. How they're the right size for the space we have. How effective they are. They're not detailed, but we know who they are. They don't have faces, but we can know their attitudes. They don't speak, but still they tell a story.

But there's no angel. I'm not sure why there is no angel, I hope there wasn't originally an angel which subsequently met with a terrible fate (eaten by possums in the loft, perhaps?). No one I've spoken to here has remembered there ever being an angel as part of the scene. And neither does anyone remember why no angel was made.

Hopefully it wasn't as mundane as running out of material.

Perhaps it was decided that there be no angel, because we, the congregation, take the part of the angels in the nativity scene. Witnessing this scene and singing praise to God.

And telling people about this scene – about Jesus – because, after all, that's the role of angels – to be messengers – messengers from God to people.

Our reading this morning from the book of Hebrews tells us about God speaking to people...

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways,

And that's what we see as we read through the Old Testament – God speaking to the people through prophets. From Amos to Zephania.

The writer to the Hebrews tells us that God has spoken through the prophets, but now, with the first Christmas that we remember today, God has spoken to us even more directly - "but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe."

God sent Jesus to communicate with us in a way that we can understand! The miracle of the message is that God still speaks to us today so that we can still know him.

God had been speaking throughout history to reveal himself to his people. He wants people to know him, to love him, to worship him. And to live their lives *his* way. Sure enough, God does reveal himself through his creation, the wonders of the universe, through the world, through the sun, moon and stars. God did speak to Moses in the burning bush, he spoke to the Israelites from the smoke and fire on the mountain, he spoke to Elijah in a still, small voice, to Isaiah in a vision in the temple. He spoke to Joseph through dreams.

God had been speaking his message through visions and dreams, through angels, through symbols, natural events, and many other means. God had been speaking throughout history in a variety of places through a variety of means in order to make himself and his will known.

As we read the Old Testament, we find that God's revelations were fragmentary, occasional, and no single one of them contained the whole message, because, after all, they were often delivered by flawed people. They could not adequately capture the full picture of God's nature.

And before that first Christmas, there had been 400 years of silence. Since the prophet Malachi last brought messages from God to the people, which are recorded in the last book of the Old Testament, there had been no prophets speaking to the people.

God had been speaking, but people weren't getting the message. They didn't understand God's heart. They didn't understand God's plan. Many claimed to be speaking for God, but they only misrepresented him to others and claimed the glory for themselves.

But then, on that first Christmas, God sent his son to bring his message to the people - to us! In Jesus, God revealed himself directly to us. Certainly, God revealed himself through the words spoken by Jesus, through what he said, but he did more than that: Jesus is the living, divine Son of God. He wasn't a flawed messenger, as those before him had been – in fact, he did more than just proclaim God's message – he was – and is – God's message for us.

Jesus came to make God known – make him known us in ways that we can understand. The writer of Hebrews goes on to say of Jesus in verse 3, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven." John's Gospel describes Jesus as the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us. So, if we want to know what God is like, we need to look to Jesus!

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul writes that "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, (Colossians 1:15,19)

When Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus replied, "Have I been among you all this time without your knowing me, Philip? The one who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). And Jesus declares in John 10:30, "I and the Father are one."

But the wonder of the message of God is not just the fact that God speaks to us through Jesus, but that the message has the power to change us – to transform our lives. Christmas is the celebration of

the greatest message ever proclaimed. Immanuel. God is with us. Being one of us. Living a human life and ultimately dying a human death. In Jesus, God came near so that he could be near us, and we could know him. Paul's letter to Timothy (1 Tim 2:6) says Jesus gave his life as a ransom for all: In Jesus, God was reconciling the world to Himself. Jesus came so that God could show us himself and his plan for us in a way that we could understand. Jesus came to proclaim God's message that we can be set free from sin and death's hold on our lives.

And God did that because he loves us. Because God wanted us to know how very much he loves us. God wanted us to know that he created us all for a reason - that we might know and love him and be with him. Jesus came to not only show us God's kingdom, but to open the way to it. By his death on the cross, he set us free from the power of sin and death over our lives. He opened the way for us to everlasting life.

We get messages every day in all sorts of ways. Some are trivial, some are important, a few are even life changing.

But amongst all those messages, there's the most important message of all. The message that comes to us from God who loved us so much that he gave his only son for us. As John's gospel tells us, The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

God's message is for you and for me – for all of us. Let's take that message to heart, and share that message with the world.

Amen