

CHRISTMAS EVE 2023

Isaiah 9. 2-7

Hebrews 1. 1-4

John 1. 1-14

When I was a child, we used to holiday at McRae each summer for one week. We stayed up on the hill in my aunt's house and we used to pad down a very steep bush track to the beach each day to get a good dose of sunburn, passing through the foreshore camping ground and the old white canvas tents set up under the tea tree. There was a mill of humanity there, everyone cheek by jowl, sharing the amenities blocks together, living out in the elements, sitting in the cool of the evening sharing a beer and a chat and passing the time together.

My family seemed to occupy splendid isolation up on the hill; above all the riff-raff on the foreshore. I was terribly envious of the simplicity and their freedom. The lack of need to keep everything just so; the freedom to muck in with others' kids and come and go as you pleased. There was something about all these people thrown in together enjoying the extended four-week, post-Christmas break where the whole pace of life changed and was reduced to the basics demanded by life under canvas. So-called camping now seems to involve massive four-wheel drives, pulling dual axle, entirely self-contained, off-road caravans with every convenience you can imagine. Grey nomads travelling in splendid isolation. Gone seem to be the days of the intimacy shared by life under canvas.

John tells us that the Word became flesh and lived among us. The Greek says that the Word became flesh and pitched tent among us. Maybe this image, more than any other gives us an imaginative insight into the gospel writers' understanding of the way in which God joins humanity in the person of Jesus. He didn't join in a house on the hill, in a palace – the natural place the Magi go to look - but came and pitched a tent alongside, sharing the daily comings and goings, sitting in the evening and enjoying a chat and a beer, overhearing the arguments barely muffled by two layers of canvas between, receiving and caring for the children who wanted some relief from the family tensions. Pitched tent alongside.

This morning we had a service of readings and carols which followed the thread of wisdom literature which begins in the Hebrew scriptures – the Old Testament – a thread finds its fulfillment in the Gospel of John in the image of the Word made flesh who has pitched tent among us. We heard from the Wisdom of Yeshua or Jesus, Son of Sirach from the Apocrypha. We heard an account of a figure known as Wisdom, an account which starts back at the beginning of Creation:

² In the assembly of the Most High wisdom opens her mouth,
and in the presence of God's hosts she tells of her glory:

³ "I came forth from the mouth of the Most High,
and covered the earth like a mist.

⁴ I dwelt in the highest heavens,
and my throne was in a pillar of cloud.

⁵ Alone I compassed the vault of heaven
and traversed the depths of the abyss.

⁶ Over waves of the sea, over all the earth,

and over every people and nation I have held sway.

⁷ Among all these I sought a resting place;
in whose territory should I abide?

⁸ “Then the Creator of all things gave me a command,
and my Creator chose the place for my tent.

He said, ‘Make your dwelling in Jacob,
and in Israel receive your inheritance.’

⁹ Before the ages, in the beginning, he created me,
and for all the ages I shall not cease to be.

¹⁰ In the holy tent I ministered before him,
and so I was established in Zion.

¹¹ Thus in the beloved city he gave me a resting place,
and in Jerusalem was my domain.

¹² I took root in an honored people,
in the portion of the Lord, his heritage. (Sirach 24. 1-12)

John’s image of the Word being in the beginning with God echo of these words of the Wisdom of Jesus, Son of Sirach –

my Creator chose the place for my tent.
He said, ‘Make your dwelling in Jacob,
and in Israel receive your inheritance.’

The world that we come into offers us life as a kind of trajectory from beginning to end, where the purpose of being is to make progress - one step in front of another, getting ahead. From childcare offered as early learning, through thirteen years of school, on to tertiary study, work, career, success, indulged retirement. Life portrayed as a kind of linear trajectory. But life’s not like that really. Life is more a kind of meandering, two steps forward, one step back, detours that we find we want to take or are forced into by circumstances beyond our control. And in the meandering, we are invited to get wisdom, to savour the experience, to enjoy life. There is a saying which is attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates. He supposedly said this when he was under trial for impiety and corrupting youth. He said "The unexamined life is not worth living."

The charge against Jesus was that of impiety and corrupting people – turning them away from the systems of control that kept them on a treadmill of fear. We have our own systems by which our lives are driven along; the need to get ahead, fear of falling behind, of not being able to keep up with the expectations about career, or beauty or some narrow definition of manliness, fear for our children’s future. Wisdom cannot be earned or bought but must simply be worked at; it’s a never-ending life task – not one of duty but nevertheless a kind of discipline undertaken under the loving gaze of God.

This one who was in the beginning with God, says to us: take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.

a Other ancient authorities read *I have acquired a possession*

So, as we receive this one who has come into the world, full of grace and truth, may we find ways to take his yoke and learn wisdom from him and know ourselves as God's graced and beloved children.

Andrew Boyle