

GOD IN OUR NEIGHBOURHOOD HEBREWS 1:1-4

“The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.” Have you got new neighbours? What are they like? Do you think you’ll get on with them? Do they play loud music and park 6 cars outside the front door every night? We’re always a bit anxious when new people come to live in our neighbourhood because we just don’t know what they’ll be like and what they’ll do and how the neighbourhood will change as a result of their moving in. Brick Lane in London is famous as the centre of the Bangladeshi community and its curry houses, but in its time it has been a Jewish quarter, a centre of Irish weavers and before that a place of safety for Huguenot refugees; it is a neighbourhood that has gone through changes because of those who have moved in.

Our neighbourhoods have almost become like little boxes in which we live and we have less and less contact with the people around us. We have our own little world and it is often untouched by our neighbours and that is why many people want it. We find it hard to speak to the neighbours; we may not even know the neighbours! I worked in Sighthill in early 80’s and visited people in the tower blocks in the Calders. Some of the loneliest people I have ever met lived in these tower blocks, surrounded by people, yet they didn’t know the neighbours and didn’t want to know them and were even frightened of them. Their neighbourhood was full of fear and loneliness rather than love and friendship. There are signs that life is still like that and perhaps becoming more and more like that as time goes by.

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Advent. The word ‘advent’ simply means ‘coming’ and this is the season when we remember the coming of Jesus into the world. Later in the season we will tell the stories of His birth and of all that went with His coming, the shepherds and angels, Mary and Joseph, the inn at Bethlehem; and we will sing carols that tell the story and help us understand what that story means. This year, our advent services will have as their theme ‘Jesus in the neighbourhood!’ a phrase that comes from the opening verses of John’s gospel. John doesn’t tell us the stories of Jesus’ birth, but He does take a step back from the stories to look at what the stories mean, and the significance of Jesus’ coming. He comes to the conclusion that there are big things happening here, things that we struggle to grasp, but momentous things, things that affect us and our neighbourhood and our world, that change us, our neighbourhood, and our world for ever.

Jesus in our neighbourhood – Hebrews helps us see what that might mean. Traditionally this is seen as an anonymous letter to some Jewish Christians; someone suggested that rather than a letter this is a sermon preached to a group of Jewish Christians trying to help them understand what Christian faith is all about, what Jesus’ coming means and what Jesus did. It certainly begins by trying to help us understand what the coming of Jesus is all about. This is God’s world; we are people whom God has made and with whom God wants to live in relationship. To keep that relationship on track, God sent a whole variety of prophets who brought the word of the Lord to the people so that they would know something of what God is like and how God wanted His people to live. These men (& were mainly men) were inspired by God and knew something of God and brought what they knew.

When Jesus came, God showed Himself to the world in a completely new way. Hebrews says “in these...” (1:2) Jesus is the Son. God’s Son has come into the world. The One to whom everything belongs; the One who was there at the creation of the universe – the Son of God has come into our neighbourhood. “The Son...” (1:3) You want to know what God is like, says the preacher, then look at Jesus. The

glory of God is somehow invisible, a light that is bright beyond anything we can bear, the presence of God from which people hide their faces it is so bright – Jesus brings that glory into our neighbourhood. At the Royal Mint, they make millions of £1 coins each day; the blank pieces of metal go through the stamping machine and the machine stamps them with the image of the Queen on one side and a picture on the other. The coin then bears the exact image of the stamp and every one of them is the same. Jesus bears the exact stamp of the character and nature of God; He is the exact representation of the character and nature of God. You want to know what God is like, then look at Jesus.

This is the glory of the Christmas story. Jesus is God's Son come into our world. "Lo! with in a manger lies, he who built the starry skies"; or a more modern version of carol "The One who strode among the stars, and called each one by name, lies helpless in a mother's arms and must learn to walk again." (Graham Kendrick) God has come into our neighbourhood when Jesus came to Bethlehem. That has been the Christian story ever since. We haven't always understood what that means or the implications of this story, but nonetheless that has been and still is, the bigness of Christmas; this is a huge story, that in Jesus the living God, the creator of the universe, the one who has existed before time began and who will outlive us all, He is in our world, He has come to live in our neighbourhood.

What is our neighbourhood like? Is it fit for God to live in? Here is what our world is made up of; these are some of things that make up our life in our world. Work: for some work is enormously positive and satisfying, but for others it is a drudge, or even redundancy. Family: today we celebrate family life in Eilidh's baptism and all the good things that families are, but we all know that families can be a big source of pain and strife. Leisure: life and work is so stressful at times that we need ways in which to relax, but these can become obsessions. Religion, church, faith and the spiritual things of life are precious and valuable when taken in the right way, yet can become a source of conflict or a dead ritual. There are other things that make up life: money, possessions, addictions, pleasure experiences.

Our neighbourhood is full of good things: we don't hear good news stories too much, but there is an enormous amount of good being done in our communities. £21m promised to Children in Need on one Friday evening a few weeks ago, must say something about the goodness in people's hearts. There are all kinds of other stories that people could tell of their neighbours and friends being kind, supportive, and generous to them in times of need. Our world is also full of evil, violence, all the dark side of human nature that comes to fore at times and that makes the news headlines: terrorism in Mumbai, parents who abuse children, war, greed etc etc. These too are part of our world, or the world we live in, even if they don't touch our lives and our own personal neighbourhood; these good and evil things are part of our world, and they were part of the world into which Jesus came to live 2000 years ago.

Picture the scene: you are sitting in Church (actually it's a synagogue). A lad who grew up in the village has come back for the weekend and has come to the service. One of the elders invites him to read the lesson and he opens the Bible and chooses a piece (or maybe it was reading for day!) from one of prophets, from Isaiah chapter 61. "The Spirit..." (Luke 4:18f) Then he sits down and the people wait for him to say something else. This Nazareth boy has begun to get a bit of a reputation for healing people and for the insight of His teaching, so they wait. Next they hear: "Today..." (4:21) This is a bit puzzling because they always understood that these words refer to coming of the Messiah, of God coming to earth in His chosen One, but they are like us and know who this is, they know that he is Joseph's son!

In the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus challenges people to see that God has come to change their world and He is the One to do it. In their world, there are people who are poor, there are people in prison (either literally or in chains to their fears and guilt and regrets); there are people who are oppressed, blind, or in despair. It is to this world that God has come, to our world in all that goes to make up that world. God has not come to a world that is only about Church, religion and faith; God has not come to a world that is full of sugar-coated goodness, living on some pink fluffy cloud. God has come to our world in which our lives are filled with lots of different things, in which there is goodness, but also unspeakable evil; God has come to a world where even the motives by which we do good things can be mixed, even tainted. Jesus has come to this world to bring grace and peace, to set people free from their prisons and fears, to bring good news to poor, to bring sight to blind (both literally and metaphorically) and above all to bring grace and favour from God into our world, our neighbourhood, our lives.

What would be good news for you today? For some people in our world it would be that the next food convoy has arrived, or that there is a new well in the village that has clean water. For you it might be that you've passed your exams, or that someone ill has recovered. Or it might be something that takes away your feelings of guilt and regret, or that restores your sense of self-esteem, or that takes away your fears by a feeling of peace and calm. Good news comes in many shapes and forms depending on our lives and circumstances. There is good news for all of us here, no matter what our circumstances: God cares! God cares enough about us and our world and our lives to come and share our neighbourhood, to come and live here for a time. God cares about your circumstances and mine enough to come and share the good and the bad, to live our life, to taste first-hand what life for us is like, at work, in our families, with our friends, what it means to suffer and die – all of this God has done when Jesus came. Here is good news!

The world is a different place since Jesus came. Advent is about the coming of light, light to show us the way. Jesus shows us what God is like and says 'believe'; Jesus shows us the difference between good and evil, right and wrong and says 'you choose'. Jesus says 'here is good news; God cares for you; accept His love for you!' The glorious message of Advent is that God has come into our neighbourhood; there is a serious 'Wow!' factor about this good news; God has come. It is up to us what we do with that good news. Best of all is to believe, to open our hearts and receive the light that Jesus brings.