

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 20th December 2020

“What would you like for Christmas?” I wonder how many times that question has been asked these past weeks?

My friends in Wimbledon in London were telling me recently that their seven-year-old son, Roman, had compiled his list to send off to Santa, and they were quite taken aback when at the top of his requests was “A BMW – a real one”! Perhaps not this year, anyhow!

But I suspect that for a huge number of folk, all they really want is to be home for Christmas in this particular year when we have been separated for so long, when we haven’t seen loved ones, apart from Face-timing or Skype, for many months.

I know that there will be millions of people all over the world who will want to be back home for Christmas, and, for many, sadly, it is not going to be feasible because of the continued crisis of the Pandemic which has shut us away all this time and makes meeting up so difficult.

There is a song that we will hear on the radio lots of times in the next few days.

“I’ll be home for Christmas,

You can count on me.

Please have snow and mistletoe

And presents on the tree.

Christmas Eve will find me

Where the love light gleams.

I’ll be home for Christmas,

If only in my dreams!”

Is there any other time of the year that evokes for us so powerfully any other notion of “home”?

Lights in the windows; family seated around the fire.

Laughter, singing, food, memories.

Home. What a very simple and a very powerful word that is!

Even in Aldi’s television advert, the nation’s most beloved vegetable, Kevin The Carrot, is determined to see his loved ones and get back home no matter what!

As part of my first degree at Glasgow University, when I was studying French and German, I had to spend a year in France to help improve my knowledge and grasp of the language. I was nineteen years of age, and it was my first time away from home and family.

And though I relished my months spent in a very picturesque part of Southern France, near the great city of Montpellier, little was I aware, before I left these shores, of the dreadful emotion of homesickness that would strike me quite out of the blue, and when it did happen, there was nothing I could do but endure it until it passed – that longing to hear the voices of your family and see their faces; that yearning to be in familiar surroundings; that ache for simple things that were missing; that void, that emptiness that only home can satisfy.

In the Wizard of Oz, after all her fantastic travels and adventures, Dorothy says, “There’s no place like home”

And do you remember E.T? He pointed to the sky with that long, bony finger that lit up at the end and lit up our hearts when he said, “Home”.

If you go up to the town of Hamilton and visit the office of the local newspaper, “The Hamilton Advertiser”, there hanging on the wall in a glass frame is a sheet of dog-eared newsprint, creased and yellowed with age, but it has a fascinating story behind it.

Many years ago, during the First World War, when General Allenby was leading a campaign in Palestine against the Turks, a unit of Scottish soldiers was out on patrol in the desert. Suddenly they dived for cover. Up ahead, they had seen something white fluttering among the scrub, and they suspected an ambush. However, when a couple of the lads wormed their way forward to investigate, they found nothing more sinister than a windblown page from the Hamilton Advertiser! How it had reached that distant, desolate spot was a mystery, but away there, in the heat and the glare of the desert, it was like an unexpected message from home to the Lanarkshire lad who found it – a welcome reminder of the friendly bustle of Hamilton Cross on a Saturday night, of the green braes of home, and above all, of loved ones far away.

In the 40th chapter of Isaiah, the prophet speaks a word from God to the people of Israel who were living far from home because they had been taken away from Jerusalem, away from their homes and surroundings. For sixty years those Jewish men and women and their families had been living as captives and exiles in Babylon, the modern day Iraq. They had given up hope of ever seeing the Promised Land again; some of them still dreamt of returning and Isaiah’s words from God were given to inspire them and assure them that they would indeed come home one day. They must not despair or give up, and they must continue to do God’s work and prepare for that wonderful time ahead. They would go home one day- a highway was going to be built that they can walk on to return home! They would march across the desert, led by a victorious God whose strong arm would defend them.

And indeed they did.

If going home means going back to the place from which you started, then going home has to do with going back to God.

The Bible tells us that God is our home, and until we come to know Him, we will always be searching for that perfect place of safety and rest and joy and love that exists only with the all encompassing reality of God.

So how can we find our way to God? How can we find our way home?

Jesus is the way home. He gives us the directions; He points the way; He accompanies us on the road; He helps us negotiate the twists and turns and obstacles we encounter.

In a modern translation of the Bible, there is a verse in St John's Gospel, speaking of the Incarnation, which is translated, "So the Word became human and made His home among us."

To go home for Christmas is to go back to the kind of life that God would have us lead. To go home for Christmas is to go back to being the kind of people God made us to be.

And these weeks of Advent are a very powerful reminder to us that we will never be satisfied and content until we are finally at home with God.

Long ago, St Augustine wrote, "Our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee."

I am very conscious of all those who will miss being at home this particular year; I know how family gatherings won't be the same because someone has not been able to travel home; and my prayers are with them and their loved ones.

Can you think of a time in recent years when our world has been more charged with fear? When our own country has been so divided and distrustful? When the scale of human tragedy across the globe has been so vast?

Our faith is that God has taken on human flesh and dwells in your life and mine. Wherever we find ourselves this December, He calls us to be part of building a home big enough for everyone.

The poet, Robert Frost, once wrote, "Home is the place where, when you go there, they have to take you in."

Christmas, for me, is the place where God, for reasons of love and grace, comes to us, embraces us, welcomes us unconditionally, saying, "I am happy you're home!"

The Revd Fraser R Aitken, Locum Minister