

**St. Barnabas 9.30pm 'Midnight' Communion [for St Bs only]  
St. Mary's 8am BCP Holy Communion {for St Ms only}**

***Isaiah 52:7-10***

***John 1:1-14***

I've tried to take a couple of liberties with our family traditions this Christmas. My first attempt never got off the starting blocks, despite support from Graham (my husband); I suggested to our son (who for the first time, will only be with us for Christmas Day) that we might have a synthetic Christmas Tree. I was firmly told that "it's got to be a proper tree", and there must be "no wussing out now". We have sent photos that show we have complied with his strictures.

However, I'm wondering if he will notice that I've taken liberties with the trees on the Christmas cake instead?! Bless them, I think the trees I've used all his life were my grandmother's originally; they are certainly as old as I am; if I said they're looking a little more 'larch' than 'spruce' would you know what I mean? A tad on the deciduous side! So..... don't tell him.... but I've bought new ones! I've put the best of the old ones on too, and not changed the character of the usual rough icing design, but since he's moved into a new era of life, I felt the cake could too.

If we take liberties with something, we are deemed to be bold, possibly impertinent. I was obviously presumptuous to suggest we could have a fake Christmas Tree, and not showing appropriate respect for family traditions. But I could argue, that it is perfectly appropriate to take liberties with traditional assumptions and behaviours at Christmas, because that is exactly what Christmas is all about: God, taking liberties with people's expectations and doing something radically new.

If you are set as a sentinel, then you are standing guard, watching for danger and attack, be it over a castle or city. If you lift up your voice and cry out, the expectation is that you will be announcing some threat to the people you are protecting. My son may have left home, but he's still standing sentinel over the traditions he has grown up with, making sure they're in place at the right time!

But our reading from Isaiah has the sentinels standing guard over Jerusalem as singing for joy, because they are seeing a new thing. Isaiah 52 is full of exultation, and a considerable outpouring of emotion at the new way in which God is revealing his reign and purposes. At the time people understood this prophecy as involving their return to the ruins of their city state to rebuild it, along with their religious and cultural traditions. The birth of Jesus that we celebrate this night/morning fulfils it in a much broader sense, God is not so much rescuing his people from exile, as rescuing the

world through his people, and for that they need to be in the right place, for the right time.

The tradition of reading John 1v1-14 at Christmas is one that hasn't changed for centuries. It encapsulates the idea of God as the living Word, revealed in the birth of Jesus. God is speaking God's mind - telling us exactly what his thinking is! It is a radical departure from the style and context of the other Gospel accounts, and yet it takes us right back to the heart of God's character as the one who breathed life into the world.

John 1 makes it clear that Jesus had a pre-history, that went back far further than any young virgin, barren old woman, busy angel or even any prophesy to an exiled people. All those words and encounters with God may have seemed like they were taking liberties with what people understood as the way the world worked, but that it is only our perception, created by the limits and traditions of our understanding.

John makes clear that our faith in the simple fact of the coming into the world of Jesus can be stimulated purely by his existence. Jesus is the saviour who will refuse to be pinned down to precise human expectations, who brings a new way of knowing God, and takes liberties with the traditions that accrete to any religious practice. But, John also makes clear that Jesus has been with us since the dawn of time, is the one through whom all things were created,

and fulfils the legacy of prophetic tradition that writes John the Baptist so clearly into the context of his birth.

The joy of Christmas should be in both keeping old traditions, and either renewing them or starting new ones, be they religious and secular, decorative or gastronomic. Perhaps tonight/this morning we can take a few moments to consider what God is asking us to take liberties with? If our faith is going to be true to the revelation of God we see in scripture, we shouldn't believe, do or say things that fly in the face of revealing Jesus as our loving and creative God, for whom no-one is outside his life-giving purposes. However, whilst it may seem a paradox, if we are to be sentinels standing guard over that faith, we need to lift our voices and proclaim with joy any prophesy of a fresh coming of God's work into our lives, or the lives of our community; any news of God doing a new thing.

So this year we celebrate the families beginning to attend [FAB] Messy each week {month}, those that have already stepped from there into other forms of Sunday worship, those taking new steps in ministry by training for and leading us in worship, and take the liberty of dreaming and praying about the possibilities of [acquiring and utilising adjacent buildings] {reaching out to the local horse-riding community}. These are just some of the things that show Jesus is the living Word, that his birth has significance in our lives, and that that we are being good sentinels, exulting in

the way that God is revealing his reign and his purposes this Christmas.