

SERMON

Rt Rev Stephen Cottrell, Archbishop of York

St. Luke's Gospel, chapter one and verses 78 and 79: 'By the tender mercy of our God the dawn from on high will break upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness in the shadow of death and to guide our feet into the way of peace'. Back in November during the heart of the second lockdown and around bonfire night I went out into my garden and stared into the sky. Fireworks were lighting up the sky and exploding all around me as they were again, last night, the sky ablaze with colour, but on New Year's Eve the fireworks all happen at once, and by about ten past midnight, they've stopped. Everything is quiet again. And we can think particularly about ourselves and what's happening to our world as one year passes to another, our place in the world.

And even I suppose how we might try to build a better world this year. And as we stand and look, one large light is left, the moon and millions and millions of little ones go out yourself tonight and look at the night sky. It is a wonderful way of finding perspective. Apparently, Abraham Lincoln used to take his Cabinet out to look at the night sky. If they were having a difficult meeting and couldn't come to a decision, he said it helped them. It helped them make better decisions, ones that weren't just about them. And even if you're in a city and there's too much light pollution or even if there are clouds concealing the full panoply of galaxies that make up this tremendous universe of which we are a part, there are countless stars in the sky. We know they are there. And the more you look the more you see. Thousands of years ago the writer of Psalm 8 looked up into the same sky and was filled with awe at God's power and majesty. You have set your glory in the heavens, he declared and in comparison to the heavens which are the work of God's hands and the moon and the stars, which God has set in place he wonders how God can also be mindful of little human beings and care for them.

Yet filled with even greater wonder he recognises that God has made us only a little lower than the angels and crowned us with glory and honour and given us dominion over the earth and everything in it. Sisters and brothers we have not exercised this dominion over the earth, very wisely. We have been enormously clever in finding out how it works, in subduing and controlling it and using it for our own ends. We have even come to know that the bright lights we see in the sky are the after burn of that star's demise, and that the universe itself now expanding will one day contract in upon itself and that just as there has been a beginning so there will be an end. But on the whole we no longer see God in either.

In 1952 Bertrand Russell wrote this, "Humanity has survived hither too, because his ignorance and incompetence have made his folly ineffective. Now that science has shown us how to make folly effective we must abandon folly or perish." But we have not abandoned folly. And our scientific and technological capabilities are greater than ever. We have achieved so much and learnt so little. Billions of pounds are spent each year on ever more sophisticated ways of killing each other. Even as we try to get COVID-19 under control, war and famine still ravage our world and our dependence on fossil fuels and our inability to wake up to the damage it is doing to our planet set other clocks ticking which make the security of our world ever more fragile.

We know (but don't acknowledge so that it changes our behaviour) that COVID-19 itself was made ever more likely to occur because of our mistreatment of the planet. As wild areas of our world disappear, and rain forests are cut down, as temperatures and sea levels rise, and as the equilibrium of our planet is disturbed, we may have to face other pandemics and worse besides.

We need to learn how to be stewards of the earth. We, the human race need to change direction. On the first Christmas night the shepherds went to Bethlehem to find that the God who had given humanity dominion over the earth made us little lower than the angels, given us creativity, wisdom, joy and most amazing of all self-giving love and the consciousness of love and all the responsibilities that go with it was now giving us something else. Something supreme love itself in the person of Jesus Christ. The Wise Men saw a star and followed it. It changed the direction of their whole life. In the manger at Bethlehem God shows us a different way of living our lives, how to tread lightly on the earth and how to place ourselves in the perspective of God's kingdom and to live differently. God is showing us his favour and mercy to be in the words of our first reading to the Ephesians, renewed in the spirit of our minds and to be clothed in a new self according to the likeness of God. So just as those shepherds returned from the manger rejoicing and as the Wise Men took another route, so we will be changed, our attitudes, our values, our priorities, even our hearts, God's light. The light of Christ will dawn upon us this New Year, bringing comfort and joy even to these dark difficult times and guide our feet into the way of peace.

The Bible tells us that Mary, the mother of Jesus, treasured all the words of peace and comfort and joy that was spoken to her and pondered them in her heart. I can't think of a better New Year's resolution than for us to do the same.

Amen.