

Before anyone began to tell the story we told this morning of the Angel's encounter with Mary – and then later, of Elizabeth and Mary expecting babies and Elizabeth's baby jumping -- and then later, the story of Mary, Joseph and the baby — the story of the innkeeper and the shepherds — the story of the angels and the wise men; they were telling another story:

A story about a donkey and palm branches — Pilate and the trial, a cross on a hill — and a tomb found empty early Sunday morning.

They began to tell and to pass on to us, the beautiful, tender and hidden story of the events surrounding Christ's birth only because they had been witnesses of that other story, both brutal and glorious — because they had seen the cross and met Jesus alive again.

By this incredible fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, those days in Jerusalem, Jesus followers began to perceive all of the implications of the story of his birth:

- ✘ The Prophecy of Micah, regarding a ruler to come from Bethlehem, fulfilled.
- ✘ The prophecy of Isaiah had been fulfilled: *“He hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all”*
- ✘ The acclamation of John the Baptist had been proved true: *“Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world”*
- ✘ The clutches of death had been burst open because as Peter said in his first sermon on the day of Pentecost, *“It was not possible for him to be held by death...”*

And so they looked back. They looked back from those days in Jerusalem to an earlier night in the nearby village of Bethlehem. They looked back to the earliest time that God's redeeming visitation began. Back to the angel's visit to Mary, back to Mary's relationship with Elizabeth, back to the birth of the *“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Savior, Prince of peace.”* And they began to tell the story of Christmas because they knew now, that it was the story of the birth of God.

Those two stories are never to be separated — are always to be kept together. That earlier one that begins with Elizabeth's Baby and reaches its climax in Bethlehem. -- that later one that begins in the River Jordan and ends on a hill outside Jerusalem. The church reminds us of this in her calendar. The very first day after Christmas is the feast of St Stephen, the first to die for the offense of bearing witness to the light which had come to those who walked in darkness. The third day after Christmas is the feast of the Holy Innocent Children killed by Herod's cruelty, fearing and opposing love's birth.

The two stories are always to be kept together. He was born to die. Sent by his father into a world which murders prophets, martyrs witnesses and slaughters innocent children. He was born into a world of suffering, and sorrow and pain and death, to

walk, himself, the way of suffering, sorrow, pain and death -- and in walking that way himself, to take it all away for our sakes. We ourselves keep the two stories together. Next Saturday night, we will celebrate **Christ Mass**. We will celebrate his blessed birth, by celebrating the memorial of his death: the Mass – Holy Communion - or as some call it, Eucharist.

Good Friday afternoon — Easter early morning — Christmas late at night: All the stories of God's unfathomable love conquering our sorrows, conquering our fears and conquering death itself are wrapped up in this celebration we are about to embark on.

It's all here:

- ✘ Elizabeth's baby
- ✘ Mary and Joseph's trusting God
- ✘ The babe lying in the manger.
- ✘ The great physician, healing the lame, the blind, the lepers — healing us.
- ✘ The good shepherd tending and guarding his own sheep. Calling each of us by name.
- ✘ The Lamb of God bearing away all our sins, all our sorrow, and all our fear.
- ✘ The risen Lord, bestowing upon us light and life.
- ✘ The man born to be king in God's kingdom. The kingdom in which at last, all our pain will be swallowed up in love.

All of it, all the wondrous work of God visiting his people is present in this story of Mary and her Baby.

Come let us adore him

Amen.