**Sermon Dec. 31, 2023 Galatians 4: 4-7 & Luke 2: 15-21**

 Have you ever heard of ‘Twixmas’-it’s a new word to describe the time between Christmas and New Year, which is where we are now. A moment when we look back to our surviving the frantic rush to celebrate Christmas-more at the behest of retailers then as a time recall its spiritual significance-followed by a sense of anti climax. We, also, look ahead (not forward!) to 2024, which seems ominous both at home and abroad. Our two readings look back and ahead, which may give us some suggestions for hope rather than dread.

 In Luke, we look back at the shepherds response to the breathtaking news of God’s promise of a Messiah being fulfilled with the birth of Jesus or Immanuel, as the angel told Mary-Immanuel meaning ‘God with us,’ Why did God take this huge step? It was because He loved us-“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son… Jn. 3: 16. We look ahead in the Galatians extract, where Paul shows the outworkings of God’s love in those who believe in Him. We are redeemed (a picture from the pawnbroker’s shop where an item handed over earlier is bought back) or bought back from sin to become part of God’s family. As sons or daughter in God’s family, we can, by his Holy Spirit call Almighty God ‘Father’ and, thus, face the New Year with greater confidence.

 We look back to the Shepherds in Lk. 2: 15-21 (p. 1028 in the pew bibles) to see the basic reason for celebrating Christmas. God’s love for us-His wayward creatures-has led to His entering our time and space world. The infinite and totally good God accepted the constraints of our finite and grubby existence to help us, to forgive us and to transform us as part of His family. WHY? His unconditional love was the reason. This is AMAZING-such an overworked word! It can cover the most trivial event like squeezing the turkey into the oven to the most staggering one, which fills us with awe and wonder. I have been struck over the last few days by the immensity of His Love. It is unfathomable-almost unbelievable. How or why, I wonder, does God put up with us. It is so hard to get one’s head around that. Perhaps, we see the occasional glimpse of it nowadays. Do you remember the man and his daughter trapped together under the rubble after the Omagh bombing? She died, but he lived and could forgive the IRA-surely an example of unconditional Love. God’s breathtaking love, shown in the birth of Jesus, was revealed, first, to the shepherds-at the bottom of the contemporary pile, nomadic, deemed untrustworthy and con men-rather than to the high ups. That’s another aspect of His love-no respecter of persons. And the shepherds’ response-“let’s go and see” (v15)-“they spread the word” (17) and like their hearers they were “all amazed” (v18). As we look back and reflect on Christmas has this been our response? I ask myself this as much as anyone else.

 We look ahead in the Galatians’ extract 4: 4-7 (p 1170) to see the outworkings of God’s love in us, when we accept him and His love. There’s the fact of His birth-when “the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us.” (Jn. 1: 14) The Incarnation, as this is called, is stressed twice “born of a woman, under law.” (Gal.4: 4). Jesus was fully human and yet God. This is a miracle on a par with the Resurrection. Some think it is even greater. Indeed, God came to earth to help us. In the same way, it can be better to jump in to help a swimmer in difficulties than to shout instructions from the bank. There’s the fact that He, in his love, did this “to redeem those under the law…” (Gal. 4: 5) God revealed to Moses that sin cuts us off from God, though an animal sacrifice could atone for or cover the sin. Jesus’ sacrifice on the Cross is a far better and complete atonement. There’s the fact that we “might receive the full rights as sons” (and daughters) in God’s family (v5). We are enabled by the Holy Spirit to call Almighty God “Father Abba..” (v6) This is extraordinary, as if, when the Queen was in her full robes, crowned as Head of State, Prince Charles ran up to give her a hug saying ‘Mummy, Mummy.’ In our original state we’re not part of God’s family-like the Prodigal we must say “I have sinned against Heaven and before you”( Lk. 15: 4) and we are not “worthy to be called your son..” Yet in his love God wants us to “receive the full rights of sons and daughters and to be part of his family, so we can pray to God as our Father to sustain us in 2024. What a thought!

 To sum up, as we look back-the shepherds were told “good news of great Joy to you and all people” that “a Saviour who is Christ the Lord” had been born (Lk. 2: 10-11). Thus , was God’s great love to us shown-they were amazed, checked it out and told others. This birth or Incarnation was not, as it were, in Churchill’s words “the end, not the beginning of the end, but the end of the beginning” for us. We can experience the outworkings of God’s love in our lives. So to look ahead, if we believe in and commit ourselves to Jesus, we are part of God’s family, can call Him Abba Father and trust his fatherly presence to sustain us in the New Year. Perhaps, our motto or prayer for 2014 could be “so we know and can rely on the love God has for us.” 1 John 4: 16