

## **Prologue and Sermon for Carol Service 11<sup>th</sup> & 18<sup>th</sup> December 2022**

**Preached at St Michael, Smarden, and All Saints, Biddenden**

**John 1:1-14**

### **Prologue**

Among those of us with a Christian faith, it is often said that Advent is a season of waiting. We participate in waiting with Mary and Joseph for the birth of their son, and we wait with the people of Israel for the birth of their, and our, Saviour, and we wait with all humanity to celebrate the appearance of God himself, our creator, in human form.

It's a weird sort of waiting, since all these things have already happened, and we continue to wait for them every year, but as the Welsh poet and priest R.S. Thomas so memorably wrote in his poem *Kneeling*, "The Meaning is in the Waiting". It is in the waiting that we find the mystery and magic, awe and anticipation. In the waiting, we see and hear things with new eyes and ears, as if for the first time. In the waiting, we pay attention to things we may normally have walked past unnoticed.

The story of Jesus' birth is treated with great reverence by the Church. If Jesus were a modern superhero, the nativity would be like his 'origin' story, the prologue to the main trilogy perhaps, showing us how he came to be who he is.

You can imagine the movie tagline: "A long time ago in a Galilee far far away..."

But if Jesus were a superhero, he would be a most infuriating one, who mostly refuses to use his powers, and instead works on people's hearts by loving and forgiving them.

So, as we listen to the old story of Jesus' birth once again, I invite you to pay attention to the longing of your own heart. Consider what it is about this story and these songs that draws you in. Whether you believe or not, is there something about the idea of a loving creator God who comes to journey alongside us as a helpless child, that stirs our own hearts to virtue and compassion?

### **Sermon**

This final reading from the beginning of John's gospel is probably the most famous in the whole Christian Bible, because it speaks about the greatest mystery of

them all – the idea that God, the creator of all things, at one point in history chose to be born as a human being, as a baby called Jesus.

John's gospel insists that this little baby Jesus in a manger was actually with God before the universe was created. And then he drops the bombshell that he believes Jesus is in fact God himself, come to save us from the great mess of cruelty, selfishness, and violence that humanity has gotten itself into.

I'll be honest, it's pretty crazy stuff. While a large majority of humanity professes a belief in creative divinity of one form or another, and sees great value in trying to connect with that divinity, to reach out in prayer or other spiritual practices, the idea that this supernatural God who's way out there beyond the stars, too big to imagine, let alone understand, the idea that this deity became human and came into the world in a specific place at a specific time, to bring unconditional love back into our hearts, to show us a better way, this idea is harder to comprehend.

I wonder what we all think, today, in the twenty-first century, about Jesus? I suspect it probably isn't so much different to the characters in the story. The shepherds are shocked by an encounter with angels. They go to the stable in awe, caught up in something they don't understand but somehow feel an attraction to. There's something beautiful there, and perhaps they wish their entire lives were full of it, but they can't put their finger on what it is.

The wise men too, come seeking... something, uncertain. They recognise the signs in the heavens, but are they surprised by what they find? They go first to Herod's palace and must feel rather overdressed when they finally follow the star to the stable with their expensive gifts. We always focus on the presents they brought – the gold, frankincense and myrrh – but I wonder what they took away with them when they travelled home to the east. Were they changed by the experience? What did they talk about on the long camel ride home?

We too, come to the manger, confused and uncertain. We listen to the readings in a reverential awe that echoes the shepherds beside the crib. We look at the strange building around us, built stone by stone and carving by carving by people of another generation, and we wonder what it is that inspired such effort and passion. We listen to the singing of children and see wonder and mystery written on their faces. There's something here, something that's not just nostalgia for our own childhood, something that is still alive in our own hearts today, something perhaps, still waiting to be born in our own lives.

There must, surely, be something in the idea of a God of love becoming a human child that triggers a sort of longing in us. It seems implausible, but what if it's

*true?* Or maybe the real question is not whether it's true, but whether we really long for it to *be* true?

If we start from the end and assume that this baby Jesus really is the Son of God, the creator of us all, come to share our own humanity, then it begins to tell us an awful lot about what God is like.

Suddenly we have a God who, despite being the creator and sustainer of all things, is humble enough to be a human child, who gets told off by his parents, who gets treated pretty badly by his own community, and who eventually is put to death by the authorities because they're afraid he might take power from them. Through none of this does he ever choose to dominate anyone, to control or coerce anyone.

If Jesus is in fact God, then suddenly we have a God who walks alongside us, suffers as we suffer, rejoices as we rejoice, comes to our weddings, our baptisms and our funerals, drinks in the pub, laughs at the rubbish Christmas Cracker jokes, serves at the food bank and the soup kitchen, although actually I suspect he is more likely to be waiting in line, and listening to the others who are sleeping rough.

Suddenly we have a God who loves and cares particularly for those that his society sidelines – the disabled, the sick, the mentally ill, widows, orphans, foreigners, everyone who has been excluded and told that they are not worthy of belonging.

Jesus shows us a God who not only seeks out those on the margins, but actually is one of those on the margins, rejected by most of the human race he created.

Throughout our lives, sometimes we are the shepherds in confusion and awe; sometimes we are the wise men following a star to who knows what and where; sometimes we're Joseph, holding things together but not sure who all these extra guests are; sometimes we're Mary, who said yes to God's request and was faithful and feisty at the beginning and the end; and sometimes we're the donkey, stubborn and dependable. But sometimes we might even be the baby Jesus, because we too are called to be children of God.

*This* light continues to shine in the darkness, and the darkness, even today, has not overcome it. May that light which has drawn us to the manger, watching and wondering, fill our hearts and minds with that love which transforms us, so that we too might live our lives full of grace and truth. Amen.

**Christmas Blessing**

May the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the perseverance of the wise men, the obedience of Joseph and Mary and the peace of the Christ-child be yours this Christmas; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be among you and remain with you always. Amen.