

Sermon for 24th December 2022 – Midnight Mass – Year A

Preached at All Saints Biddenden

Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

Sermon

Why are you here?

I don't mean in the existential sense, more in the sense of why come to church on a cold, dark, winter's night, when we could be snuggled up at home with a belly full of warm mulled wine and mince pies?

Some of us may come to church on Christmas Eve because tomorrow morning is going to be a busy family time, while others may come because they have no family around and don't want to greet Christmas alone.

Most of us will want to feel uplifted, refreshed, and hopeful in the face of all the depressing problems that the world and our nation are facing. What could be more heart-warming than forgetting all our troubles and imagining ourselves visiting a gurgling new-born with exhausted but serene parents surrounded by lovely local well-wishers, barnyard animals and wealthy visitors bringing expensive gifts?

The problem is that all our readings around this time of year are rooted in some serious political compost from start to finish. We can certainly try to ignore the politics and focus on that bucolic scene in the stable, but we may find that the angels' peace and goodwill to all men doesn't quite hit home, especially when we're surrounded by the really difficult and traumatic stuff going on across the world and also near at home.

After the last few years, for almost all of us there's now a sort of underlying trauma and anxiety that we carry in our bones and that we can't quite escape

from. There's a famous book for mental health practitioners called "The Body Keeps the Score" which reminds us that even if traumatic experiences may one day fade from our memories, our bodies nevertheless record all the pain we have felt, and it can come up time and again in unexpected ways and at unexpected times.

When a person sees a counsellor – something I've experienced several times in my life – they may often list the things that they've been going through, but minimise the impact it's having on them. Oh, yes, I did experience all those awful things, but mustn't grumble; many have it worse. And then the therapist may gently point out that actually what you have been through is truly traumatic, and you have done extraordinarily well just to be here.

So, when I think back through the past few years, and the state of the world as it is now, I just want to applaud all of you climbing all those mountains, and continuing with determination to be kind, and forgiving, and compassionate.

From 2500 years ago, Isaiah's prophecy cries out optimistically "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light!" and normally we nod along with the beautiful, inspiring and familiar words, but we have seen so much darkness these past few years, and how much more do we now long for some light?!

So, we might want to reflect on the fact that the story of Jesus' birth, though no doubt a heart-warming and magical tale for all ages, is a serious political and spiritual intervention by God into a human history that was, frankly, going to hell in a handbasket, and we need that message today just as much as the Jews needed to hear it in Jesus' day, living as they did under the boot of Roman occupation.

Right now, we may not be far off feeling the frustration Mary and Joseph experienced as they searched desperately for somewhere Mary could give birth. They weren't travelling with the anticipation that they would arrive to a familiar, homemade Christmas. They were headed towards something uncomfortable

and probably unwelcome. Unlike our traditional Christmas where we head home to be with family and friends, Mary and Joseph are moving further and further away from their home and support networks, becoming lonelier and lonelier.

Do we begin to feel some connection with their situation? No matter what they (or we) try, things just get seem to get worse. Mary is pregnant outside marriage. They're stuck in a town where they don't know anyone – or if they do, no one is willing to take them in. They're sleeping in a stable. Herod the king is trying to track them down, and not for a good reason. And even after the joy of the birth itself, they must run to Egypt, seeking asylum from Herod's paranoia.

And yet, somehow even in this dislocation, Mary and Joseph make a home where there is no home; Jesus nestles in the manger and is nurtured in his parents' arms; the shepherds tell the story of the magnificent angels, gathered together in the dim candlelight of the stable, as if they are with old friends. In that first Christmas, they all made the best of a very bad situation indeed, so they know how we feel, and they have a message for us.

In the midst of all the darkness, there is indeed a light. However serious the circumstances, whenever and wherever we are aware of God's presence, this light causes our perspective to shift and to be transformed. St Julian of Norwich once wrote that because of God's love, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well," but she lived through the Black Death and serious illness, so when she says all will be well, you know it's either a huge leap of faith or the result of a very intimate experience of God's presence.

But if we're honest, most of us want a lot more from God than just his presence. We want him to fix everything that's wrong with the world.

The people of Jesus' day wanted God to end the Roman nightmare. We've lived through a Covid nightmare and now we want God to end the recession nightmare, and the war in Ukraine nightmare, and the climate change nightmare,

and a myriad other distressing things in today's world. But throughout history, God's response is not to send a miracle fix, but another kind of miracle, himself. Nothing is directly changed by an experience of God, but somehow everything changes, because our perspective has changed. The birth of Jesus did not change the immediate circumstances of any of the people who greeted him. The shepherds returned to their fields; the wise men travelled back to the east; Mary and Joseph still needed to go on the run. The only difference was that their perspective of the world was transformed by knowing that God loves us, without condition or reserve.

This is the power of Jesus in the manger. He doesn't say or do anything. He can't. He's a baby. But he is present, and his presence is, somehow, for everyone who meets him, enough to completely change the world.