

## **2012 24<sup>th</sup> December Christmas Midnight Mass, Salisbury Cathedral**

*Isa 9.2-7; Luke 2.1-20; John 1.1-14*

### **According to the Scriptures**

The birth of Jesus happened “according to the scriptures”, but it was not as expected: in Bethlehem, which is David’s town but not the big city of Jerusalem with its King and Temple; to Mary, a young girl engaged to be married, from Nazareth, up North in Galilee.

It was surprising, according to the scriptures.

### **Shepherds**

On Friday, and again last night, I had the privilege of standing in front of the crib, of blessing it and kneeling before it in silence. I am wary of the privilege of bishops. One of the salutary moments of the last year came when I was processing to the bishop’s throne as the choir sang the Magnificat, the song of Mary: “He has put down the mighty from their seat and hath exalted the humble and meek”. Jesus could be tough on “religious professionals” including those who took the best seats in the synagogue, the lawyers who lauded it over others, and those who were over-confident about their own goodness.

I once spent the night in St Thomas’ Hospital Accident and Emergency unit just across the River Thames from Westminster. I was the Vicar of St Martin in the Fields, a church with a care for the poor and particularly for homeless people. Staying overnight in a large London hospital I was with a dozen or so men, most of whom were homeless, some of whom had drunk too much, and I was unable to do any good to them. I was alongside them, also in need of care, as one of them.

Now look at the crib or, if you can’t see it, look afterwards. The wonder and connection of Mary and the Christ child is central. Joseph looks apprehensive but he is very still, a patient man, which is just as well as that will be needed. The extraordinary shepherds draw the eye. One with a turban and looking pretty rough, another a shepherdess, a woman. I don’t think she was in the Bible story. One with a shepherd’s crook, like a bishop, has an eye patch so he can only half see. His face has been etched by a hard life. These people are rough hewn. Like them, we’re not here because of our virtue but because of God’s love.

In his account of the birth of Jesus, Luke is making a point by telling us that angels announced the birth of Jesus first to Shepherds watching their flocks by night. On the hills outside Bethlehem, where it’s not silent and the view today is blighted by a shocking wall and the lights of settlements, the shepherds could not keep the religious laws of ritual purity. Despite the sometimes heroic accounts of Biblical shepherds, the first to hear the good news of the birth of the Saviour were religious outsiders. It is the pattern of Luke’s Gospel in which Christ is known among the poor, the outcast, women, lepers, Samaritans and those in greatest need of forgiveness, sinners. Like many of us, they are not the sort of people a General Synod would have voted for to come to the crib, but God did.

### **Christianity and the Census**

According to Luke’s Gospel, Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem because there was a census. Now we’ve just had the results of our census and the number of people in this country who say they are Christian has dropped to 59%. I heard the President of the British Humanist Association on the radio say that belief in God is like belief in Father Christmas: we’ll grow out of it. That’s

wishful thinking on his part. Most of us have come to a reasonable view that to be human is to be religious. We wake up in the morning and wonder at the beauty of this vast expanding universe and almost instinctively, 'Thank God'.

Only 59% of us say we are Christians, but I bet more like 100% are going to celebrate Christmas. To celebrate the light and love of God, to light a candle in a time of darkness and give and receive presents makes us all more human. "Oh but bishop that's cultural Christianity: we all keep Christmas but that doesn't mean we all believe in it."

Our culture in Britain *is* deeply Christian: that's my point. Cherish it and nurture the deep roots from which these values come.

## **2012**

2012 has been a great year in Britain partly because it gave an answer to the anxious discussion of the last 20 years or so about what it is to be British. The Queen's Diamond Jubilee, including her visit to Salisbury, was good for all of us. The Queen asked that in our celebrations no-one should eat alone, so all over the country there were community meals. A shared meal, making a community: what a great idea. Simple! And in the darkness of the night beacons lit the nation and the Commonwealth.

Near the start of her Diamond Jubilee, the Queen visited Lambeth Palace to meet leaders of the United Kingdom's faith communities. The Archbishop of Canterbury spoke about the religious role that is central to the monarchy and to Queen Elizabeth personally. He said:

Our Christian faith tells us that no-one flourishes unless all flourish; and this ought to turn us away from any attitude of superiority or partisanship as Christians. Strong Christian faith should be a guarantee for the well-being of all.

*Archbishop Rowan Williams, 15<sup>th</sup> February 2012*

Self-effacing but confident Christianity; service which is both a duty and a joy.

The other great success of 2012 was the Olympics: not just the athletes but the way Britain hosted the Games, and especially the volunteer 'games makers'. Danny Boyle's opening ceremony gave an account of what it is to be British that was as recognisably true in Dorset and Wiltshire as it was in Brixton and Balsall Heath. Within it were three hymns, acknowledging the Christian roots of our diverse and tolerant culture.

The writer Frank Cottrell-Boyce said that for him the 7,000 volunteers who took part in the opening ceremony redefined the nation. I won't get away with quoting him exactly from the pulpit but what he almost said was:

"We're told people need to be paid great sums to get results, but those who are motivated by money [muck] up because they're [rubbish]. People who are motivated by things like love, family, friendship and humanity are the ones who have something to offer."

That's so close to what St Luke is telling us in the story of the shepherds as to be recognisably Christian.

## **Live as people who believe**

In fact most people behave as though we *do* in some ways believe in Christmas.

For the people of Newtown Connecticut, the thing that will help them more than anything else is their determination that the horror of their children and teachers being shot will not be the last word. In the way they care for each other and cherish their memories of the innocent who were slaughtered, they will live as people who believe that love, goodness, light and life are stronger than hatred, evil, darkness and death.

The wickedness of those in Afghanistan who buried the land mine that also killed children is like that of the American gunman. We are shocked by the callousness of it, the unfeeling brutality. As for our soldiers stationed there, what matters then is *our* response, how to make something good in the face of wickedness.

Later in this service we will hear again the opening of John's Gospel.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...

in him was life and the life was the light of all...

the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it....

we have seen his glory, the glory of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

That's deep Wisdom, not "just" cultural Christianity. It is to live by faith in the light and life of Christ whose birth we celebrate at Christmas and to whom be glory now and forever.

Amen