

Sermon – Christmas Morning – 25th December 2019

Do you have a favourite Christmas decoration? When I was a child, we had a mobile with Santa figures which always hung at the foot of the staircase – it had chimes at the bottom, so every time we went up or down the stairs, we would give it a ring. There was an outcry when Mum got rid of that a few years ago – though it was rather damaged from many years of use.

Here in church, I am very fond of our nativity scene. I wonder if you have one at home? I just love the way we are able to light the area inside the altar, casting a golden glow on the scene. It's such a familiar scene and has an almost domestic feel. The birth of a child – any child – is a special time, and here we see a newborn baby surrounded by loving parents, and welcome guests.

But whilst this may look like a lovely domestic scene, let's pause for a moment – is it really that homely, warm and familiar? After all, which of us would choose for our own baby to be placed in a manger – a feeding trough – immediately after its birth? And come to that, which of us would choose to have a long journey at nine months pregnant, and to be turned away from anywhere suitable to stay?

If we are going to fully understand the meaning of Christmas, we need to see what is wrong with this scene. We need to be reminded that it shows us some of the things that are wrong with the world. The place into which Jesus was born was governed by the Romans, and the census was about power and control. Ensuring that they could get as much money as possible out of people and demonstrating their influence. And of course the full horror of what that looks like becomes clear with the story of the wise men, because their encounter with Herod is a reminder of the extreme lengths Roman leaders would go to in order to prevent any threat to their own power – in this case planning the wholesale massacre of infants.

If it is true to say that there was plenty wrong with the world two thousand years ago, it is probably fair to say that in some ways little has changed. There continues to be poverty and hunger; there are those who profit at the expense of others; there are nations of the world where leaders are corrupt and unscrupulous.

I expect by this point you're really glad you came. So now for the good news. And it's important to recognise the challenges if we are really going to understand just how good the news is.

Because in the middle of all that's wrong about a young family forced to travel so far only to have to give birth alongside the animals, what we also see is what is right: the baby lying in the manger.

This is Jesus. This is God with us. This is the sign to us that God really does want to be with us.

And the good news that comes from understanding what's wrong is that God *knows* what is wrong and *still* wants to be with us. God isn't blind and unknowing. God knows exactly what each of us is like. God knows what is wrong with the world. And still God wants to be with us.

There is even better news, though. Because what we see in Joseph and Mary are a young man and woman, committed to one another, and committed even more to God. Who both said yes to God and allowed their lives to be transformed. The angels who brought news to the shepherds, who

stopped what they were doing to visit Jesus. The magi paid homage, too, and were sufficiently suspicious of Herod's motives that they refused to lead him to Jesus.

And the transformation that was made possible for Mary, for Joseph and the wise men is possible for us too. There are glimpses of what is right in our own time, all around us, if we care to look for them. Those people who have been volunteering in Crisis centres over this Christmas period – and if you spoke to them you would probably discover that their own lives had been as changed by the experience as the lives of those making use of the shelters. Wherever we see kindness, warmth, generosity, selfless love, even in the smallest ways, we see what is possible. If you want to know what love looks like, find out a bit more about the life of the baby whose birth we are celebrating today. See who he chose to spend time with; the values that he lived by; what he said and did.

The Christmas story is about God knowing us, loving us and wanting to be with us. It's so important that we remember that God knows we aren't perfect and still wants to be with us. Still wants to live in a relationship with us.

And the question we are asked by the Christmas story is whether we want to be with God. Whether we want to know God as much as God wants to know us. And how we will show God's love for us in the way we live with the people around us too.

Sometimes it really is quite small things that make a difference. How we respond when we don't quite get the present we wanted. Helping with the cooking, or table laying, or washing the dishes. God wants to be with us because God knows who we are, and God also knows all that we can be. We have been blessed with such love; how are you going to share it?

Amen