

Collect, Readings and Sermon for Friday 24th December 2021 at 23.30

Collect

Eternal God,
who made this most holy night
to shine with the brightness of your one true light:
bring us, who have known the revelation of that light on earth,
to see the radiance of your heavenly glory;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.
Amen.

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Sermon

I am an absolute sucker for Christmas songs on the radio. Controversial, I know, but as far as I'm concerned, Christmas music in November is absolutely fine. I blame my obsession with Christmas music on my parents. It's always a safe bet to blame the parents, but on this occasion I think I have justification. In 1984 they bought my sister and I Walkman radios for Christmas. It was the year of Band Aid's Do they Know it's Christmas and Wham's Last Christmas. My sister and I competed to dial through the radio stations and find our favourite Christmas song. We were hooked.

Do you notice, though, the range of emotions conveyed in Christmas songs? From light-hearted joy and merriment to the pain of broken relationships; from delighted expectation to anguish and loneliness, there is, arguably, something for everyone. Or, some might say, something to annoy everyone. Even this year, in the Ed Sheeran and Elton John number, there is a nod to the challenging year that we have experienced.

While I wouldn't want to suggest that popular Christmas songs bear too much analysis, they do acknowledge various aspects of our lived experience. The world as it is. With its ups and downs; its highs and lows.

And probably, as we approach the end of another year, we can also connect with a year that has had its ups and downs. Nationally and internationally we have seen the wonders of scientific endeavour creating not only vaccinations, but also better treatments for those with Covid; we have seen genuine attempts to tackle climate change at COP 26, even if there remains so much more to do; yet we have also seen the apparent devastation of Afghanistan following the withdrawal of foreign forces. And if all of that feels just a bit too big, I am sure you will recognise personal highs and lows this year. Weddings and funerals; career decisions; life choices; the unexpected – both good and bad.

This evening's gospel reading, from the second chapter of Luke's gospel, may be set over 2000 years ago, but it speaks of a world that is not all that different from our own. Just listen:

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.”

It may not be Emperor Augustus or Quirinius, but we have our own Queen and Prime Minister. We have to complete the ten yearly census; pay our taxes; register for state benefits. Luke sets the scene of a world that we can recognise – albeit that we can complete our census online, with a little less fuss than Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem. A world that has good leaders and bad; where there is joy and sorrow; where people can be generous and selfish.

Luke tells us something quite extraordinary: that God comes into this world. Our world. With its ups and downs; its highs and lows. Where we can be cruel and kind. This is the world that God enters. Quite voluntarily.

And if that wasn't enough to make us sit up and take notice, God enters this world – this beautiful, imperfect world, with beautiful, imperfect people – as a baby. As one of us. But not just any one of us, but rather the most vulnerable.

Luke, who wrote this gospel, is a marvellous storyteller, and he invites us to enter into the story that he is telling. He invites us to look, with him, for signs of God in this beautiful, imperfect world.

I wonder how it is that you tend to imagine God. For some of us, it can be hard to escape from a rather distant perception of God; the image of the kindly (or indeed not so kindly) old man in the sky. Yet the whole point of Christmas is that God is the very opposite. God is intimately involved in our human lives. More than that, God knows what it is to experience human life – the best of it, and the worst of it.

Luke shows us God entering the world as it is to be with us as we are.

And the question for each of us this Christmas is what it means to notice. If we return to each of the characters in Luke's story, we are invited to consider what it looks like to notice. The impression we are given is that those in authority simply aren't interested. Augustus is Emperor; Quirinius is Governor, and they want a census. It doesn't matter to them whether it's inconvenient to their subjects. And so they simply don't notice. They are oblivious to Mary and Joseph's arduous journey; oblivious to the birth of their son – of God among us.

What about the other characters? I wonder who Mary and Joseph met on their journey, and who they engaged with. I wonder whether any of them were struck by this rather unusual couple, and wondered about the baby that was to be born. I wonder, too, how many places Mary and Joseph went round before they found an innkeeper prepared to give them somewhere to stay. How many people simply ignored their plight. Ignored the presence of God among them. Even when they were given the stable, was it an act of genuine love? Did the innkeeper really notice? Or did he just realise that he could make a little extra money if he allowed them to use his stable? We can only guess.

What we do know is that the shepherds really do take note. They are visited by angels, and in spite of their initial terror, they decide to visit the new baby. They stop; they notice; and they share the good news.

This Christmas, I wonder whether it's worth taking some time to consider where God is in our midst today. Where it is that we might find the presence of God among us. We know that it will often be among the vulnerable; among those who have very little. We know, too, that the sign of that presence will be an overwhelming love. A love which captures our own hearts and fills us with love for others.

The world may not be as we want it to be. Each of our lives will undoubtedly have its ups and downs. And God chooses to enter our lives as they are; to be with us as we are; and to love us without limit.

Amen