

Collect, Readings and Sermon for 25th December 2020 at 10 am

Collect

Lord Jesus Christ,
your birth at Bethlehem
draws us to kneel in wonder at heaven touching earth:
accept our heartfelt praise
as we worship you,
our Saviour and our eternal God.
Amen

Isaiah 52:7-10

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'
Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.
Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The Lord has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

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

NB Presents

If I ask you to picture a Christmas scene, I wonder what it is that comes into your head. Just think about it for a moment. I wonder what featured in the scene you imagined. Was it outside, with snow? Did you see Christmas lights? Perhaps you were inside, with a log fire and Christmas decorations. If there were people in your image, were they wearing Christmas jumpers? Or wrapped up warm as protection from the cold? Did you envisage children, perhaps with new toys? Or a large extended family sat round a table, with a golden turkey with all the trimmings?

This year has been exceptional, and one of the things I have particularly missed are the visits from the local schools to the church building for their Christmas services. They are always occasions that fill me with joy. A great deal of work goes into them, and the results are always glorious. I must admit that our local schools always produce very well-rehearsed performances, but a particular joy of nativity plays, especially in infant schools, is the way the unexpected almost always happens. Whether it's the child who has the loudest voice yet sings rather off key; the reluctant Mary, Joseph or shepherd (delete as appropriate); the child who just doesn't seem to have a clue what they're supposed to be doing. These are the things that make us smile. And they are also a crucial reminder that life really isn't about perfection.

Let's just think for a moment about that first Christmas. The familiar story that we hear, year after year, about Mary being visited by an angel, and then, nearly nine months later, having to make the journey to Bethlehem for the census. Again, if I ask you to picture the scene, I wonder what it looks like. Do you have Mary dressed beautifully in a blue dress and head shawl? Perhaps atop the donkey, or maybe the donkey is walking alongside, carrying the luggage. And when it comes to the manger scene, is there that golden glow of warmth? Thankful parents; peaceful baby; contented animals.

And perhaps that's where we need to pause for just a moment and remember that it probably really wasn't like that at all. Just think about it. Mary was just a normal young woman, betrothed to an equally ordinary young man, a carpenter. She was nearly nine months pregnant – about to pop, we might unattractively say – and she was required to make a 90 mile journey to Bethlehem.

I am currently studying at Sarum college in Salisbury and make the journey there quite frequently – it's just over 80 miles. It takes a couple of hours and is pretty tiring. And that's in a car. I really can't imagine what it would be like on foot. Or even on a donkey.

If we return to the Christmas story, Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem in need of somewhere to stay. Again, in our understandable desire to domesticate Christmas, it has become almost romantic that Jesus was born in a stable. But I wonder what it was actually like for Mary and Joseph to arrive in Bethlehem and discover that there was literally nowhere to stay. And while our images of that stable are sanitised, it was nevertheless a home for animals and Jesus was laid in the feeding trough. Bethlehem may not be as cold as the UK in December, but it probably wasn't warm, and I expect it didn't smell too fragrant.

But if you think I'm making these points to destroy your lovely images of Christmas, let me assure you that I really am not. The messiness of that first Christmas is actually very good news indeed.

I don't know about you, but while I thoroughly enjoy Christmas advertisements with everyone smiling, large families around a groaning table, warm fires and Christmas sparkles, across the years my experiences of Christmas haven't always been like that. In fact, if I'm honest, they have probably never really been like that. It's not that I have been particularly unfortunate – quite the opposite. But life happens. This year we know that more than ever.

And it's not just about Christmas, either. If God chose to be with us only when we were on our best behaviour and when things were going really well, it wouldn't be good news. But the message of Christmas is that God chooses to be with us no matter what. God is at home in the messiness of our everyday lives. Whether things are going well, or not. Whether we are happy, or not. Whether we feel successful, or not.

In fact, as we follow the life of Jesus once he has grown up, we will discover that Jesus has a real heart for those who actually aren't that successful. Who are very much on the edges. Who have been rejected and overlooked. It's not that he doesn't care about the whole of us, but the suggestion is that he comes alongside us the most closely when we are feeling at our most vulnerable. And that is very good news indeed.

Christmas can be a time when we put a huge amount of pressure on ourselves and one another to create something perfect and magical. This year the challenges have been very different. I know countless people who have struggled to decide who to spend Christmas with, or whether in fact it is safer to stay at home. We have all been asking searching questions, trying to make wise decisions without really being able to know the consequences of our choices. And then, right at the last moment, it was all swept away from under our feet.

But I wonder whether now, as we find ourselves at Christmas Day, whatever it looks like, it might be possible to pause for a moment; to cut ourselves a little slack; and to remember that all God wants is to be with us, just as we are.

However you spend today – and I imagine it isn't how you once expected - I hope and pray that it is a healthy one. And most of all that you are able to take just a moment to remember that God loves you, just as you are. And, in whatever way you can, to share that love with someone else. Because God loves them, too.

Amen