

Sermon by Rev. Sara Davies Christmas Eve 2020 Midnight Mass

May the words of my lips and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight. O Lord our strength and Redeemer. Amen

Our Gospel reading this evening is the classic story of the nativity, the one that we, our children or grandchildren will have dressed up for at some point in our lives. St Luke's version has no wise men whilst St Matthew's doesn't include shepherds so there will always have been some degree of poetic license, but I think between the two of them we get the general picture.

Maybe at the end of such a turbulent year it's good to have some normality in our lives, the story of the birth of Jesus that we can relate to, that we're comfortable with. We can predict that whatever happens in the coming year, nativity sets will again be brought out next Christmas, and someone somewhere will definitely be dressing up in blue as Mary, with tinsel as an angel or with a tea towel on their head as a shepherd. My favourite memory will still be of a child coming up to me at the end of a crib service a few years ago telling me that the service was rubbish as we didn't have real angels, just kids dressed up!

Nostalgia has its place, there sometimes being a fine line between that and 'tradition' within the church. We certainly need something to make us feel good this year, but is there something new that we can take from this Gospel story of the Nativity which relates to where we currently find ourselves this year? The Bible relates to every generation, it remains 'fresh', it really isn't a case of same old story, year after year.

We can reflect on much of what has happened to us this year using the story of the Nativity. To start with, Mary and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem to register for the census, it was a means of the Romans collecting tax. Would it have been anymore popular than the directives which we have had to follow from our Government during Covid 19? Was there the same sort of grumbling at the inconvenience of it all? Maybe we can draw closer to Mary and Joseph's experience because of our current circumstances. I wonder if our response and feelings to the guidelines and restrictions have evolved over the course of the pandemic and what a truly Christian response would look like. There are certainly no easy answers, however we feel about those who lead us in Government.

The shepherds were the first to be told about the birth of Jesus, what an incredible honour. Were they the most highly thought of people in the land, greatly respected? No, certainly not. If it wasn't for how they smelt, they would normally not have been noticed, just taken for granted and of little consequence. But this time they were the specially chosen ones, the ones given the most important of roles, the ones who were witness to the birth of a king. Why were they chosen? Could it be because the one they came to see would also become a great shepherd of a flock, showing his love for all in society, including the invisible and those not appreciated.

During our pandemic we have all been grateful for our key workers, those working to support the rest of us through a variety of roles. Whilst the NHS has been rightly recognised, what about all the other people getting on quietly with their jobs, sometimes in the background? Food distribution, as one example, involves so many different people going out in all hours and conditions. Are they people that we often think about, or give thanks for in our prayers? Will we continue to recognise all those who often have to go that little bit further in their jobs, and give them the respect that they deserve?

If we think a little further into the overall Nativity story, who exactly do we understand the wise men to be, there's a certain lack of clarity here? Ironically their story is one of great travel, precisely what we are unable to do at this present time. What we do know is that they were following a bright star for many miles, in search for a new-born king. It's strange isn't it that these people from some far away land, perhaps it was Persia, recognised Jesus as the Messiah when most of God's chosen people in Israel did not. They encountered Herod who was also searching for Jesus, albeit for different reasons. How much searching do we personally do in our understanding of God and of all that is on offer to us through faith in Jesus Christ? Nowadays many people tend to expect Jesus to come to look for them, to explain precisely who he is and what he has to offer. Life's all about choice isn't it? Who can give us the best deal? We don't even have to travel these days, we can run our lives from our computers if we have them or even our phones. With all the on-line worship made available this year it's never been easier to join in without even leaving the house.

Mary had to give birth far from her family; there was immense pressure on Joseph to care for his new family in isolation, away from home. Would their emotions be similar to those who have had to give birth or attend hospital on their own in recent months? Whilst they may have felt frustration and

uncertainty, their families may have felt helpless in the way new grandparents that I know have done. I don't think that many people have perhaps understood this unless they have been in the same situation themselves. Covid has brought so many issues to families, whether it's separation, financial worries or simply not being able to comfort those that we know have been having a hard time. The Holy Family would of course go on to become refugees, finally finding safety in Egypt. What if they had not been given sanctuary? How would the story of Jesus have ended up had they been sent back to Herod and the baby killed before his life had really begun? I wonder what the worries are of modern- day refugees, especially what life has been like for them in 2020.

Christmas is traditionally a time of great hospitality with us welcoming family and friends and either cooking for them or serving up carefully chosen shop bought food. How many of us are going to be able to do that this year? If we have been able to hold community events in some way, I expect that serving of traditional foods has either been significantly reduced or not happened at all. So how do we think that the Inn keeper felt having to turn away Mary and Joseph as there was no room for them. Have we ever considered how he may have felt not being able to offer his usual level of hospitality? Would you offer someone the chance to sleep in an out- building and what about if they were about to give birth? Uncomfortable no doubt for all concerned.

This Christmas and in the months to come, how we might follow the innkeeper's example to search for the alternative, and offer a stable even though there's no room at our 'inns'?

This year has been like no other in the same way that the year when Jesus was born was. Yes, we don't really know the date of his birth, and yes, we have only a limited idea of how the events panned out, but to be honest that really doesn't matter. If I asked you to describe all that had happened nationally this year you would probably give different answers. I hope that we can realise that despite the intervening years, the times are not so very different from those Mary and Joseph found themselves in; our experiences can be related to their experiences and Jesus is as real to us in 2020 as he was two thousand years ago. I'd like to finish with a prayer as we head towards the coming year:

Loving God, we are your community, dispersed and hurting as we are. We are still your hands and feet on this earth, and a beacon of hope for our communities. Please guide us and inspire us to offer a welcome wherever

possible, and to practise hospitality whenever we can. Show us new ways of being church, open our eyes to the needs of our community, and give us the tools to make a difference. In your loving and strong name, Jesus. Amen.