

CHRISTMAS DAY SERMON

University church of St Mary the Virgin, Oxford

25th December 2016

THE REVD CHARLOTTE BANNISTER-PARKER

Readings Luke 2.1-14, Isaiah 9.27

For many of you, this morning will have already been spent being woken up early by little ones, opening stockings, preparing the seasonal turkey and stuffing, wrapping those final precious Christmas presents, laying out the festive crackers, and then probably dashing here to St Mary's to sing a few carols and bring some focus into the day.

I suppose the question is then: where does a little baby born in a manger over 2000 years ago fit in?

Why do we return each year to this beautiful building, bless the crib and sing praises to a tiny baby? For some of you I recognise that this might be your first visit to the University Church, it being far from home, and you are most welcome. For others, including our regular congregation, the 'once-a-years' and even those teenagers here under duress, there is something deeply profound and mystical that draws us back every year. It is not just the beauty of this church nor the collective worship. I pose the argument that here today, this morning, we celebrate the most remarkable event ever to have happened in the history of mankind. Today, this morning, we celebrate God breaking into our human world; the Word made flesh; the incarnation.

And in the celebration of that great mystery we find our ultimate purpose, have ultimate hope and ultimate love. Let me explain.

For many this year has been one of great turbulence and upheaval, and we have mainly seen this in two areas. Firstly: political. The world has appointed leaders – both here and overseas – who many might consider totally unfit and inadequate to lead nations and who seem to operate in what we are now terming a 'post truth era'. These figures many find hard to visualise as true leaders, rulers or kings.

Secondly, we have seen the worst refugee crisis since the Second World War. As we think of Mary and Joseph walking in the night with no place to rest their heads, on the road despite her being heavily pregnant and a baby due any moment, travelling because the government required it, and as far from home as they had ever been, we cannot but conjure up images of the refugees here and now and their horrific plight and persecution. Our inability to help – our inability to stop the terror that caused such mass migration has left us feeling hopeless and disenfranchised. Some of us are disillusioned and frightened of a broken world and overwhelmed by a darkness which seems to have set in.

So this is the crunch. What can we believe in? Can we turn to the light and hope for another type of ruler; one who transcends this worldly narrative and offers us truth and hope, and whose love will ultimately triumph?

Jesus was this and always will be the alternative hero of that narrative. The Bible gives us the light that surpasses all others; the vision when reading the word that seeks such deep truth.

For today a king has come, not with pomp and circumstance and not as the adult warrior the Jews expected, but with innocence and vulnerability, taking the form of a helpless, poor child born in a stable (not like Herod).

The very first people that God informed of the Christ's birth were a group of insignificant nameless shepherds.

"...the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. Do not be afraid I bring you Good News that will cause great joy to all people. This will be a sign for you."

The point of them being anonymous, of low status, unwashed and sleeping rough, is that God is announcing his arrival as Jesus to the whole of mankind not to the rich and important. His message is that all human beings are of equal importance.

In TS Eliot's *The Journey of the Magi*, the Magi, or three kings, return home having seen the child but are no longer at ease:

"We returned to our places, these kingdoms, but no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation."

Once you know the story of the Christ child, once you take in its full significance, you can no longer go back to the place you were before. The kings, like the shepherds, have moved on spiritually and emotionally to a new reality of how God perceives our life can and should be. Home is a place where we feel God's peace; how the Prince of Peace shall reign over all the earth.

And that is our challenge for 2017. Not just to hold on to that hope, but to make it a reality for ourselves and, more importantly, for our friends, neighbours, strangers and even our enemies. At the midnight Mass Judith preached on how God loves us all equally, even those who we find difficult to love, even those whom we cannot find the grace or peace to reach out to ourselves. And that too is one of the most significant characteristics of His love. It is not for us to judge others, it is only for God. Our job is based on three things: on seeking truth, having trust and believing in the triumph of love.

The point of faith and of Christianity is to point to God as the meaning our lives. Our hope is to hang on to the confidence that there is some ultimate point to human existence. It might surprise you to know that God is already present in the lives of all human beings even if unnamed and unrecognised because we are made in his image and he is love.

"God is Love and who ever lives in love lives in God and God in them". (1 John 4.6)

So the goal of our hope, our ultimate destiny, is already in some way present. That is what brought the kings to their new 'home', their new way of seeing reality. Today this Christmas, we too, believe that the presence of God amongst us, taken in the form of the baby Jesus, found by the light of a star and revealed by a host of heavenly angels.

I began by talking about searching for leadership and direction. The people walking in the darkness have seen a great light. The Prince of Peace has arrived. Isaiah foretold "*of the greatness of his government and peace, there shall be no end*".

Today our sight is refreshed; our hearts open wider to making invisible love visible. Our truest 'home' is not a place, but is putting our trust and faith in Christ, recognising this true leader, our Prince of Peace that deserves our love and commitment; that of Jesus Christ. Christ coming into the world has established peace between heaven and earth, between God and man, between man and man, in the birth of a child, the Saviour Christ the Lord. And He, of course, is the greatest Christmas present of all.

Amen.