



All Saints' Marseille

Sermon

25th December 2019

Set I: Isaiah 9.2-7; Titus 2.11-14; Luke 2.1-20

The recent General Election in the United Kingdom was the first that had been held in December for nearly a century. It was strange to see some of the campaigning set against the backdrop of a country preparing for Christmas. Watching it all this time from a distance – in contrast to the heart of Westminster where I had spent the last three years – and having to explain it to French friends brought an interesting perspective.

It is always striking how politicians hoping to be elected promise certainty and clarity. Yet once the results are in, we have a sinking feeling that we will soon be back to the political realities of uncertainty and paradox. The paradox of being in one of the richest countries in the world where a child lies on a hospital floor because there isn't room for him in a bed. The paradox of hearing some of the most educated political leaders in the world saying that the process of cutting the United Kingdom off from its 27 closest neighbours will be simple and the consequences straightforward. Some in our congregations face dramatic life choices as a result of what was decided last Thursday. We know all too well here that the process will not be simple and the consequences far from straightforward. But it's what we have, and we must try to live with it creatively.



We have been reminded in recent weeks that the season of Advent is about paradox. We have been praying for the coming of Christ even though we know that Christ has already come. We have been rejoicing in all that is to be, while waiting for it to arrive with patient endurance. But it's only an example of what it means to live the Christian faith.

For a mature Christian faith is about learning to live with paradox, and to live into it fully. The mystery of a God who is wholly other being born to a teenage mother in an outhouse. Whose teaching of the unquenchable power of love overturned the anxious legalism of the religious authorities of his day, bringing life and hope to the many he encountered. Who as a result was perceived as such a threat to the establishment that his story culminates in a hideous death, and a rising in glory. The effect of which was to turn a group of frightened men hiding behind locked doors into the greatest missionary force the world has ever known. The mystery of a child who is both fully human and fully divine. The mystery of the creator of the universe coming among the creation in search of relationship - amazingly, with us.

Learning to live against the backdrop of this story - what the philosophers call a metanarrative, or grand narrative - allowing the story to permeate our consciousness and imagination, can help us see our own lives in better perspective. Whether or not we think of ourselves as Christian, we do it instinctively at Christmas, as we contemplate once more the familiar picture of manger, shepherds and magi - with a simple image of parental care at its centre and the miracle of new birth - and glimpse in it something eternal.

Contemplating the whole life of Christ can also help us live better with the uncertainties of our own lives. We long for our lives to be ordered, structured, the way ahead clear. Perhaps some of us who were drawn to become lawyers



were keen to find that sort of order in our working lives when we signed up. But instead, like everyone else, we find the mess and muddle of what it means to be human - the mystery of the one life that we have, with all its joys, sorrows and uncertainties. Yet the story of Christmas reminds us that it is also a holy mystery. That God is with us in the mess and muddle, having shared our human condition. That the child in the manger grew up to become an adult who entered the darkest place of human suffering and showed us that suffering and death do not have the last word. And who assured us that whatever happens to us he will never let us go. The story ends with the words: 'I am with you, till the end of time.'

It's part of what is often referred to as 'the great mystery of the Incarnation'. The light that shines in darkness, which the darkness has never overcome. It's also why the message of the angels, which we have heard again in this service, is 'Fear not'. It's a good message to take with us into the New Year, as we face whatever lies ahead.

Exactly eighty years ago this week, King George VI, on the threshold of a much more violent and deadly upheaval in our relationship with the continent of Europe than we are now facing, delivered a Christmas message in which he quoted a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins known as 'The Gate of the Year':

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."

And he replied:

"Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.

That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

You couldn't put it better than that. Fear not.

May I wish all of you, and those whom you love, a blessed and peaceful Christmas, and a hopeful New Year.



Amen.