

ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE

WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON

Sermon – First Sunday of Christmas – 27th December 2020

All Saints' Marseille

The Revd Jamie Johnston, Chaplain

There is so much in our short Gospel reading today that it's hard to know where to begin. Many of the things we have been thinking about in Advent are fulfilled in it.

First, it's full of call and response. The shepherds' response to hearing the angels' song is to say to one another 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this'. 'So they went with haste'. They reacted quicker than we are wont to react to the promptings of God. And they arrive to find the others who have responded too – Mary to the announcement of the angel, Joseph to the prompting of an angel in his dream, taking on the huge responsibility of bringing up this child. All of them way outside their comfort zone, but moving forward in faith and in trust. A reminder, if one were needed, that God needs our response and engagement in order to help build the Kingdom of heaven on earth.

Then there's the theme of exclusion. If God had wanted to make a powerful gesture in the Incarnation, he wouldn't have gone about it this way. Jesus was born not in a palace but a stable. Mary and Joseph were not people whom their society regarded as important. An artisan and his young wife, turning up and

finding all the accommodation gone, with no influence to change their circumstances. As one commentator has put it: God targets all the wrong people in all the wrong places. Mary and Joseph end up delivering the saviour of the world in a town they don't know, at the back of a pub, among people who have no idea that the one whom all Israel has awaited for centuries is sleeping in an animal food trough.

And then there are the shepherds. They were bottom of the food chain in that society. Living in the fields, they were unable to keep the religious purity laws, so were regarded as beyond the scope of respectability. No one would have taken them seriously if they had announced the coming of the Messiah.

But that is the point. It is to people whom the world regards as insignificant that the message is brought. It is to people whom society does not accept that God comes. It is to the unloved, the disregarded, the outcast and the ignored that Jesus is drawn throughout his ministry. There's a message for us in that. Whenever church finds itself excluding people, for whatever reason, it needs to ask itself the question: where is God's call in this, and what should our response be?

Then there's the passing on of the message. For we are told that the shepherds did pass it on, 'and all who heard it were amazed'. That's our task too.

And then there's Mary, treasuring all that was being said and pondering it in her heart. Thinking deeply about things, giving them her full attention. There's a message for us in that too.

But at the centre of it all, in addition to the Holy Family (whom the church celebrates on this first Sunday after Christmas) there is something else: a piece of farm equipment. Something inherently dirty – not only ritually unclean but positively dangerous to human health. But it was all there was. And the message of it is: ‘God can use even this.’ It’s a good message to be reminded of in a time of pandemic. ‘God can use even this.’ There are, after all, a few parallels.

We often hear it said that the Christmas story is really for children. This year, with all our preoccupations, it might seem anything but. It’s about disruption caused by a government introducing new rules without warning. It’s about a woman giving birth among animals. It’s about a despised group of workers being found necessary to the salvation of others. It’s about another group of outsiders - the Magi - making a mistake (by going to Jerusalem instead of Bethlehem) that leads to the loss of innocent lives. It’s about refugees and homeless people. It tells us more about uncertainty, fear and isolation than we may have noticed before. But it is also a story of hope for the world, which is why it is still being told.

God can’t work the salvation of the world unless humanity responds. As we stand on the threshold of a New Year, what are we going to do about it? We have already seen from the months of pandemic that this emergency has made us more compassionate, more grateful for things that are done for us, more aware of the people who matter to us, and the people on whom we depend. God is in the middle of this with us. How are we to respond to his call?

It's strange how what we thought was just our miserable experience turns out to be God's experience too. It's strange when we discover that our small, isolated human hurts have given us an insight into the heart of God. It's funny how a piece of farm equipment can be so eloquent.

And there's one more thing. In her beautiful reflection about Christmas in our online resources this week, Roxana Teleman has reminded us of the importance of how we approach the manger. She will, I hope, forgive me if I quote parts of it:

'We have outgrown, or at least tamed, our childhood faith, and we take pride in this. We have been filled with knowledge ... and we are jaded and think we have already seen (nearly) everything, or we are worried and fear the unknown.

Yet children can have a vivid and joyful sense of God's presence and it is this that we need to recover when we go to the manger. Otherwise, with heads too heavy with thoughts and hands weighed down with our busyness, we might not be open to recognise and marvel at the greatness of what has been granted to us ... This Child in the manger has overcome the chasm between God and humankind. Here, at the manger, begins the path to joy and thankfulness ...'

That seems to me a very good mindset with which to begin a New Year. May it be a blessed one for all of you.

Amen.