

Saturday 24 December 2005: Christmas Eve Parish Carol Service and BBC R4 Christmas morning

God's Power and Glory

Readings: John 1: 1-14; Luke 2: 1-7; Luke 2; 8-14

May I speak and may you hear in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
Amen.

There was a wonderful misprint in the service sheet for one of our carol services this year. Having heard of God's promise, and of the birth of the baby in a stable in Bethlehem, the next reading was headed, "The shepherds go to the manager". Those shepherds must have been very cross: "That poor baby and his parents deserve better from an inn like this. We want to see the manager...."

There will be lots of stories like that where something has gone wrong in a Christmas service or school nativity play. They add colour and make Christ's story even more our story.

Of course that's also what we do deliberately. We're not just remembering God in Christ born in Bethlehem long ago but Christ who is born in us today. That's what stops it being a sentimental story because it's not just a memory. It's about God come among us in Bethlehem and our own communities, *now*.

The Biblical stories of the birth of Jesus in Matthew and Luke's Gospels are a sort of bench-mark against which any of our retellings need to be measured. Sometimes we do it incredibly well, in a children's nativity or in the great paintings across the road in the National Gallery. Rembrandt's Dutch barn with shepherds coming in the darkness to the light of the infant Christ; or, Gosssart's Adoration of the Magi in which the Kings are dressed in haut couture to die for and in the ruins of the old dispensation lay their gifts at the feet of the infant King. Both paintings tell the ancient story in the present tense.

And sometimes we tell the story so badly that we reveal by error what it is that really matters about Christ. Over fifty years ago, C S Lewis lamented the commercialism of Xmas with its "Glory to God in the High Street". You can't buy and sell Christmas. Or last year Madame Tussaud's here in London dressed some of their models for a nativity. Posh and Becks as Mary and Joseph, George Bush and Tony Blair as Wise Men, Graham Norton and Hugh Grant as shepherds and Kylie Minogue as an angel. Instinctively it was awful but I'll confess it took me a while to work out what was really wrong with something that mirrored nativity plays in churches and schools up and down the country. The problem was one of celebrity. Jesus was born to a young woman in a stable. She and Joseph were caught up in a census with the whole of the population, and hospitality was provided by ordinary working people, an inn keeper and his wife. The first to come and worship were shepherds, people who lived outside the city, unable to keep the purity rules of their religion. And Magi came from the East, not the King and the religious leaders from Jerusalem. The Magi were powerful, certainly, but open to finding God in the eternally surprising and underwhelming end

of their journey. This was not celebrity, but here in a baby was God's power and glory in ordinary.

Any of us who have held a new born baby have sensed the awe and wonder and extraordinary power of fragile life. In *this* baby, God's story and ours intersect. At *this* moment in time, what we glimpse is eternity.

Of course what the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke do is to give us the eyes with which to see the adult life, death and resurrection that are the Gospel of Jesus. Here in infant form is the person in whom God is fully known.

One of my favourite Christmas poems is by Steve Turner:

*“Christmas is really
for the children.
Especially for children
who like animals, stables,
stars and babies wrapped
in swaddling clothes....”*

*Easter is not really
for the children
unless accompanied by a
cream filled egg.
It has whips, blood, nails,
a spear and allegations
of body snatching.
It involves politics, God
and the sins of the world...”*

You can't dress it up. This is a story for grown-ups about birth and death, life and love, forgiveness and hope. It makes something new among us. Christmas is personal, and it's about families, and it's political.

Some see the birth of Jesus and 'get it', and like Mary and Joseph, shepherds and Magi, their lives are changed. Some are indifferent: there's nothing special. And some see it and so 'get it' that they are threatened and become hostile and seek to kill God's love come among us.

This year when we go on to read about Herod trying to kill Jesus by slaying all the children in Bethlehem under two, some of us will hear in our inner selves the click, click, click that became so familiar last summer as we remembered the children in Africa, one dying every three seconds of preventable poverty and illness. Ours is the first generation that cannot say we did not know.

There's lots to give thanks for in the breathtaking beauty of our world and there's lots to cause fear, despair and anxiety. The future of the world turns on the power and glory of God made flesh in a tiny, fragile, vulnerable baby. For us who have come to the manger and seen the Christ, there's both trepidation at the responsibility given to us *and* the glorious possibility of a new birth.

