



The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light

A sermon by Revd Nicholas Holtam

Readings: Isaiah 9.2-7; John 1.1-14

Preparing for Christmas at St Martin's this year Advent has been a very rich experience. The theme of our Advent booklet of daily meditations was taken from Charles Wesley's Advent hymn, "Come thou long expected Jesus...Born to set thy people free" which is what this child does for us and for the world.

Put it down to tiredness but no end of Vicars get grumpy at Christmas and Christmas starts early here. I was cycling up to Radio 2 on 8th November and saw the Christmas lights were already on in Regents Street. It was 5.45am in the morning so no-one but my wife, her mother and God heard me complaining about them to Aled Jones: "And do you know the theme of the lights is from Narnia" - the C S Lewis Chronicles, because there's a new film out in 3D of The Voyage of the Dawn Treader. I continued with a sense of superiority by playing the card that trumped all others, "And it was C S Lewis who complained about the commercialism of Xmas and 'Glory to God in the High Street'". Aled looked bemused and sent me on my way with a cheery, "Have a very Happy Christmas", on the 8th November, as he was off on a pre-Christmas tour and we wouldn't see each other before the new year!

And I was wrong. At least the West End was trying with its lights this year. Narnia is an allegory of the Christian story and these lights were much better than when Birds Eye and Tango sponsored them a few years ago. But there is an issue about how to celebrate Christmas when what we remember is the birth of a baby in whom we see God fully, who was born in a stable at the back of a Bethlehem inn 2,000 years ago. One of London's top inns, The Ritz, is offering a six course Christmas lunch tomorrow for £380 a head, half price for children. We're on the Ritz's list of church's to go to at Christmas so if you're staying there I hope you enjoy it. There's no point pushing the boat out if you don't. It's a celebration and I'm in no position to point the finger. In a way we all do similar because consuming things has become the main way we celebrate in our society. It won't just be the very wealthy with credit card debts in January because they've over spent at Christmas. The pressure to spend in order to take part in Christmas is enormous, as every parent knows.

One response is to go counter-cultural. My parents always used to *say* that what they wanted on Christmas Day was to have a picnic lunch on Christmas Common and go for a walk. No end of people phone St Martin's in December to ask if they can come and help serve lunch for homeless people on Christmas Day. We can't take them because our volunteers have to be interviewed, trained and CRB checked and make a longer commitment than just one day, but Crisis do and for some people it's a good way through the problem of what to do at Christmas.

The instinct of this church is to work with the culture, to challenge it and encourage people to re-imagine things but not just oppose it. And see what happens when people engage with Christianity. This church is both the Royal parish church *and* the church of many of those who are homeless. Tomorrow morning we're broadcasting Worship for Christmas morning on BBC Radio 4. It was recorded nearly two weeks ago and a huge number of people took part. They included Walter who is part of the spirituality group run for homeless people at The Connection by my colleague Richard Carter. In the broadcast Walter says that he is one of many homeless people who come to St

Martin's. "God knows what we are going through", he said. "He knows what it is like to be left outside. Jesus's first visitors were rough sleepers, shepherds on the hills. When Jesus was born in a stable it shows me that we come into the world with nothing and we will also leave with nothing. What is the point if you have everything in the world but you do not help your brothers and sisters?"

The church is a place where we hold open the possibility that everyone, perhaps especially poor people, can be our teachers. Among the followers of Christ there is an equality and a reciprocity. For those of us who can afford to, it is our duty and our joy to give to others and people are extraordinarily generous in helping others. This year's Christmas Appeal for our work with homeless people and people in need all over the county has already reached last year's record total of nearly £900,000. With rising unemployment and uncertainty for many people, it is an extraordinary testimony to goodness and generosity. Someone sent £750 in postal orders saying they once spent 2 nights with us and wanted to say 'Thank you' and help someone else now. "What's the point", said Walter, "if you have everything in the world but you do not help your brothers and sisters?"

The stories of the birth of Jesus are not prescriptive about what we should do but they take us in a direction. The baby draws a response from us of wonder, love and adoration. He is very human and divine.

This is the season of full churches several times a day but at Morning Prayer today there were just a handful of us. The wooden structure on which the crib has now been made stood in front of the altar, empty apart from the heads of the ox and donkey poking through the window into a bare space. In the prayers we said we were awaiting his coming in glory. Behind the altar was the cross, as now. It takes a bit of re-imagining to see the cross as Christ's glory but this is exactly how it is with Christ raised up on the cross for the love of the world.

This afternoon at the Crib service a small child carried the baby Jesus to the crib. He smiled radiantly, so pleased to be holding the wooden figure as if it was the most precious thing in the world. This year I have been struck by the stillness of the Christ child in various cribs and pictures of the nativity, and by the quiet focused attention there is on him. Yet this infant was a threat to King Herod and made him afraid. The stories about his birth are not prescriptive but they do invite a response from us and they point us in a direction in which love, truth, goodness, light, life are all what matters. It may be more obvious and more simple to children than to complicated adults.

In our Advent meditations for Christmas Eve there is a prayer by the Biblical scholar Walter Bruggemann from his 'Prayers for Privileged People':

Here we are, as we are,
mixed but faithful
compromised but committed,
anxious but devoted to you.

Use us and our gifts for
your newness that pushes beyond
all that we can see or imagine.
We are grateful for words given us;
we are more grateful for your word fleshed among us.

Walter Bruggemann, Prayers for Privileged People

"Those who lived in a land of deep darkness –
On them light has shined.
You have multiplied the nation,

You have increased its joy.”
Isa. 9.

“The light shines in the darkness... The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

John 1.

It causes us to wonder and to worship God come among us in Jesus Christ our Lord to whom be the glory now and for ever. Amen.

There's something else about the gift to this church made by homeless people. When we had finished recording this year, Sally asked me how I felt about my predecessors. She and I feel the weight of responsibility of their legacy and our inheritance. I feel that I know each of them intimately, partly through standing in their shoes, partly through some of you because there is still a living memory in this congregation that goes back to Dick Sheppard who made the first Christmas Appeal in 1927, and I have also got to know them through their families. They were all very able, but what I like about them collectively is that they are delightfully human, and definitely not perfect. That's a marked characteristic of this church community. For clergy and congregation alike there's not a lot of front, and I think this must have something to do with the evident need of some of those who come here seeking help, making it possible for all of us to admit that we too have needs and aspects of our lives that don't add up. We accept each other as we are *and* have high expectations of each other as well as people engaged in the process of repentance and turning to face God.