

Sunday 25 December: Christmas Day

Called to the Manger

Readings: Isaiah 9.2-7; Luke 2.1-20

Arrivals and departures...

Many people have been frustrated looking up at the arrivals and departure boards at Eurostar and at our airports in the last few days in the run up to Christmas. The news stories full of people stranded, trains and planes cancelled, journeys delayed, many hoping they are going to make it home to be with their loved ones, as bad weather has taken its toll. Arriving home has been given a fresh sense of impetus...as people struggle to get to their destination for Christmas day. With this heightened sense of urgency in the air, a newspaper headline proclaims *Christmas won't wait...*

And then there is the relief of arrival, the light at the end of the euro-tunnel for some this year, of coming home or reaching our destination, being with those we love, or try to love...!

This Christmas that won't wait is here. We've arrived, breathless, expectant...some here having sung a few too many carols than is good for them, perhaps woken this morning with a sense of excitement and expectation. Why have we arrived, here at the stable door, what have we come to see? A light shining in the darkness. God come to earth to welcome us, as the Christ child in the stable. A welcome offered to all who make the journey, however hard or frustrating that journey might be.

In the birth story we hear today, angels appear in the darkness with light and good news for fearful shepherds, the invitation of the glory of God revealed in an out of the way place, to insignificant people, beyond the edges of civilised society. The Messiah, the longed for Lord, on whom the authority of the world comes to rest, Isaiah's Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace, is lying here as a child in a manger. Drawing people from the shadows and darkness into his light.

In Rembrandt's painting the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, that hangs in the National Gallery nearby (the smaller more intimate of the two versions that he painted of this scene) the setting is a great Dutch barn; darkness up in the vaulted rafters; animals in the shadows; those that gather around the Christ Child, lit only by the intimacy of the glow that comes from him, the focus of their attention reflected in their faces.

Closest around him - Mary looks on lovingly, an adoring and worshipping shepherd kneels with his back towards us, Joseph stands protectively by. Gathered around in a group to their right, another shepherd has dropped to his knees, his hands lifted to his face in wonder and amazement. Behind him are two women, one holding a child that also peers down in fascination, absorbed by the glow. And beyond them a further group who have come in, drawn into the light - another shepherd, villagers, a boy with a dog, two more coming in, one a woman also with a baby in her arms. Some are strangers, some are known to one another, an unprepossessing, ordinary lot. All have come and gathered; the shepherds leading the people of God, with haste, in from the cold, through darkness, into the light. They have all like us, for their own reasons, come to see.

That liminal moment of wonder, of finding Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger, that inspires the shepherds to go off and tell others, is captured in this painting, by

the shepherd who has his back to us; kneeling, focused, hands clasped. Something has come to life in that space between the child and this shepherd, who represents all who have ever felt themselves to be on the outside, existing on the margins, forgotten, overlooked or unnoticed. In this tiny child, he looks God straight in the face and receives his unconditional welcome, and finds himself invited in for the first time.

Invited by the one who cannot bear for anyone to be outside his love. Whose only way to communicate that is to come to the lowliest people, in the most vulnerable, simplest, way...in the breath and smell of a baby, in darkness, in an out of the way place, and turn the values and power structures of the world upside down. The shepherds invited to come in 2,000 years ago have paved the way for us, like those in Rembrandt's painting, a similarly ordinary lot, drawn to make our own way there, and experience for ourselves the welcome and overwhelming love of God.

These last few days, in those that I have encountered, there has been a sense of the darkness and light of real lives, of people who like us come gathered at the manger, needing to feel the light and love and peace and hope of Christ reflected on their faces:

A couple preparing to be married, committing to a future together, offering the only thing they have, the gift of one another. Uncertain, hopeful, standing together at the stable door.

Someone who has lost his job and the home that went with it, who pitched up at St Martin's and is using the resources of The Connection, our project next door for those who are homeless. Despite his circumstances, still open and aware that he is learning something in the experience. Rather than anger or despair, his humility showing a reflection of God's light as he comes to kneel at the manger.

A young woman who seems to have it all, struggling to find work, with the burden of expectation put upon her, searching for something deeper to anchor her, when all in life seems unstable and transitory. A sense of stability and peace draws her to the manger.

A friend whose child was born on Monday this week, overwhelmed by the joy of new life and the fulfilment of long-held hope, thankful and rejoicing...in the intimacy of God's embrace, knowing what it means to hold the baby in the manger.

And we too come, to receive God's welcome, drawn to the manger, with our own experiences of life's darkness, shadows and light – whatever we may have carried or known this past year. We come not because we are worthy but like the shepherds because we too are invited, not because we are good or brave but because God loves us.

In order for God to come to birth in us, it requires us to find that humble stable, the out of the way place, at the centre of our lives, a place of birth, and know as Michael Mayne puts it, and as the shepherds knew kneeling there, *'that in some amazing sense (whoever we are) we matter to God, because no one else in his whole creation can reflect his love back to him in exactly the same way.'*¹

And what of our departure...we came with expectation, and hope and a longing to be at home. We leave perhaps with the quiet wisdom of Mary, pondering, treasuring. Or with the exuberance of shepherds; or the humility of the person who is homeless and who is using the Connection; or the joy of the new mother who holds the child in her arms. However we leave

¹ M Mayne *This Sunrise of Wonder, Letters for the journey* Fount, Harper Collins, 1995

we leave having allowed something to come to birth in us; humble and full of wonder and trusting that we live in God's love, can sense the reflection of his light on our faces and in our lives.

As people who have knelt at the manger we are like the ordinary group of the painting, God's church – a community that reflects the light of Christ. People of faith and light who can break through the darkness. A community who are touched by the God who is involved in the light and shade of life and who are compelled to share the love they receive from Christ with others.

Christmas won't wait... it is upon us, but God is waiting to invite us, to welcome us in, to a child born in a stable. A place of arrival and departure. Arrival, because we come invited to be here. Departure because we leave in the knowledge that God loves us and stays with us. Emmanuel, God with us, leading us out to reflect his light, hope, peace and love in the world.