

# Sunday 28 December 2008: First Sunday of Christmas

## Songs of Innocence and Experience

### Reading: Luke 2.15-21

William Blake wrote two poems entitled *The Divine Image*. Blake contemplating God's incarnation could write these verses in *Songs of Innocence*:

*For Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love  
Is God, our father dear,  
And Mercy, Pity, Peace, and Love  
Is Man, his child and care.*

*For Mercy has a human heart,  
Pity a human face,  
And Love, the human form divine,  
And Peace, the human dress.*

*And all must love the human form,  
In heathen, Turk, or Jew;  
Where Mercy, Love, & Pity dwell  
There God is dwelling too.*

And yet the same poet a few years later was to become preoccupied by the suffering of humankind which he saw all around him on the streets of London and the brutal exploitation which was its cause. He believed religion was often blind to gross injustice or far worse used to defend and to legitimise it - even cause and sanction it. In *Songs of Experience* Blake wrote the contrary poem. The satire was so savage that he did not want to use it when he later combined *Songs of Innocence* and *Experience* into one volume. In this poem he wrote:

*Cruelty has a Human Heart  
And Jealousy a Human Face  
Terror the Human Form Divine  
And Secrecy the Human Dress*

*The Human Dress is Forged Iron  
The Human Form, a fiery Forge  
The Human Face, a Furnace seal'd  
The Human Heart it's hungry Gorge.*

So which of these is the true reflection of our humanity and the God we want to manifest in our lives: "Mercy, Pity, Peace and Love" or its opposite "Cruelty, Jealousy, Terror and Secrecy"? We do not have to look very far to realise that both humanity and religion itself continue to reflect both these contrary states. Indeed both these states are remembered in our worship today.

In our Gospel reading we heard that wonderful story of the shepherds in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night and of the message they received from an angel: "Do not be afraid for I bring you news of great joy" - the moment when glory shone all around them and they heard that a baby had been born in the city of David who was Christ the Lord and who would be found lying in a cattle manger wrapped in strips of cloth. It is the in-breaking of

God's love. Something which had been hidden from human sight, always beyond, was now here and with us, born of a woman, real, crying moving, feeding, heart-beating flesh and blood skin and bone - the cries of a small baby emerging into a very hostile world as a sign of God's infinite love. As Archbishop Rowan Williams writes: "In a world of competition, frenzied chatter, control obsession, there is a terrible aptness, a rhetorical rightness, in a God who speaks in a child's cry... telling us more about God than the languages of would be adult sophistication." Yes a small helpless child in an obscure place, born in poverty and dirt revealing God and turning the whole world upside-down. A baby, a miracle of life, Word speaking far louder than any words saying to us all that we should look for God here, not up there, down here in this very human and imperfect place: God a touchable presence; God in thinking, feeling, responding, painful relational life with us. Not as provider and client but the lover and the beloved. And the lover and the beloved are going to be, as they will be all through this Gospel, the poor, the outcasts, the needy, the very ones the world often rejects. These so called outcasts will become the intercessors, the means to salvation for everyone else. And God is going to chose them in front of everyone else: perhaps because it is they who have space for him and the longing for God's acceptance. An unmarried woman, a carpenter, a group of homeless shepherds and some travelling foreigners are going to be the witnesses of God's incarnation. And this revelation for them is the most brilliantly bright vision of hope. It drives out fear. It fills with confidence and joy. The shepherds are surrounded by a multitude of angels dancing and singing in the sky-proclaiming peace. A God not proclaiming fear and death but the God whose glory means peace to all people on earth. **All** people, not the chosen few while the rest are condemned - all people, including you and me.

And perhaps reason would ask what could these shepherds do? More than that what could a baby **do**, a baby with no earthly power, vulnerable, homeless soon to be a persecuted asylum seeker? What could this baby do without weapon or army, or wealth or access to power or privilege or credit card? What could a baby do born in the wrong place at the wrong time? Well all we are told is for that moment, on that night, for those shepherds things changed. It was the beginning of possibility lying in a cattle's manger. And this possibility of hope and love against the odds has been filling this church of St Martin-in the Fields to bursting throughout Advent two thousand years later.

Yet this Christmas nativity, the story of mercy, pity and love, is still being counterpointed by its terrible opposite. For today is also the day in which we remember the Holy Innocents: King Herod's massacre of children under the age of two years old because of his fear of a child born to be "King of the Jews" - a story paralleled in the Old Testament when Pharaoh slaughtered the Hebrew children in Egypt - a story paralleled throughout history and indeed today in Zimbabwe, in the Congo, in Iraq in Afghanistan, indeed in the Holy Land itself this very day as bombs rain down on the Gaza, slaughtering woman and children who are innocent of any violence or culpability themselves. Indeed paralleled in this country too where many children still face the threat of poverty and violence. Jesus faced by the appalling horror of such violence was to cry out: "Weep for your children."

But how can the dancing of angels in the sky and a baby born in a cattle shed offer any alternative or real consolation any more substantial than a fairy tale can offer? Is it just a naïve longing for an innocence which is lost? Are all those who fill our Churches and sing carols and hear this story repeated endlessly are they not just nostalgic to return to a security they lost with childhood.

I believe there is a lot more to it. There is God to it. Are we not deep within, within this Christmas story, choosing who or what is true and sacred in our lives and the story we want to belong to? Are we not in some way deep down taking the side of the vulnerable child and

coming to the stable too to recognise all that is worth worshipping and believing in and struggling for is somehow present here? Is it not the triumph of what at first seems completely powerless? And although the odds would seem to be so hopelessly against him, is not this little Christ child worth believing in, worth struggling for, worth overcoming our fear and our terror of breaking with conformity to stand up for, even when that standing up for puts our own reputation at risk? And if the Church really is Christ's body - is it not here in the out house that the Church is called to be - on the side of the victim, the vulnerable, the poor, the oppressed, the discriminated against be it for their gender, their sexuality, their ethnicity, their tribe, their creed, the country of origin, even the sins of their past? This is not about a Church which confuses genuine human sexuality and love and a desire for honesty and integrity - with the ecological devastation of the rain forest. This is about a Church which in the face of all the odds believes in the human form divine: mercy, pity, peace and love and not the ruthless contrary: cruelty, jealousy terror, secrecy. Do not be afraid says the angel; I bring good news of God's love – God's salvation for us all. That's why I want to come to a stable and worship.

On 13 December this Church of St Martin-in-the Fields was filled with people who had come to this church to find strength and solidarity and healing and to remember those they had loved. Each of those who came had been bereaved because of the violence of homicide in this country. Each of them shared similar stories of being overwhelmed by grief and feeling outcasts because of the trauma they had been through. Many had felt unable to share their trauma and unrelenting experience of fear and loss. And at the service, that had been put lovingly together by a woman whose own daughter had been murdered, they sang carols about the birth of a baby who would also one day become the victim of violence himself. They sang: "Peace on earth and mercy mild God and sinner reconciled." And those who spoke at the service spoke of their unending love for those from whom they had been parted and their desire to live out of that love. Many of them told stories of altruism and goodness in complete contrast to the terrible brutality of the loss they had suffered. All of them spoke of an end to the violence which devastates human lives. And each of those present lit candles in remembrance of those who had died. Lights in the darkness and as they did so, rose petals rained down on them from the galleries of this church as a sign of blessing and grace - for the courage to continue is only through blessing and gift. I remember those words in my own life "Follow the blessing not the curse. Yes follow the blessing." And I was aware that here was the Gospel we profess being lived out - lights in the darkness that the darkness could not put out - the realisation that we here and now must embody the alternative to violence and injustice and prejudice, that it is **us** that must live that peace on earth and good will to all people. These petals were not sentimental but were in fact the signs of a story of mercy, pity, peace and love which can save... recalling the message of the angel - "Do not be afraid; I bring you news of a great joy which will come to all people for to you, to you and for you is born this day a Saviour who is Christ the Lord."