



## Seeing Jesus

A sermon by Revd Nicholas Holtam

### Readings: Ephesians 1.3-14; John 1.10-18

Happy New Year.

Hearing the beginning of John's Gospel again on this 9<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas is a bit like going back to the fridge and finding what was a feast but wondering how to serve it up again inventively. You can feel the problem in today's liturgy: no choir to support the singing of less familiar carols and the great Prologue to John's Gospel cut differently, beginning at verse 10, continuing to verse 18, instead of the more familiar verses 1-14 of the other Christmas services.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelical Charles Simeon, when Vicar of Holy Trinity Cambridge, had an inscription placed in the pulpit so that only the preacher could see it: "Sir we would see Jesus" (John 12.21). Perhaps that's all the preacher should try to do on any day of Christmas, any day of the year.

The pace of life in the centre of London means that T S Eliot's warning haunts me about our having the experience and missing the meaning so here's a reprise of what for me were ways in which Jesus was seen at St Martin's this Christmas.

### Cribs

We take a lot of trouble with cribs at St Martin's.

The tradition of Christmas cribs was started by St Francis in 1223 when he wanted to do something that will recall the memory of the little child who was born in Bethlehem and set before us, "the inconveniences of his infant needs, how he lay in a manger with ox and ass standing by". Simplicity was honoured, poverty was exalted, humility was commended and Greccio was made a new Bethlehem.

On the Second Sunday of Advent there was the blessing of the crib in Trafalgar Square which stays there until 29<sup>th</sup> December, just before the new year's eve celebrations. There are the Zimbabwean figures in the Dick Sheppard Chapel of Mary and the child, Joseph the carpenter and an angel. And there is the crib in front of the altar made by Peter Eugene Ball out of bits and pieces that he found or had been thrown away.

What struck me this year was the stillness of the figures and the power of the baby whose love and presence can topple tyrants.

At the Crib Service on Christmas Eve a little boy walked down the middle of the church holding the figure of the Christ child with such attention and joy as if he held the only thing in the world that mattered that we were transfixed by him.

The children made such striking contributions this Christmas, not least in the Nativity Play broadcast on Christmas morning and at the Crib Service on Christmas Eve in which Kate Caspari played God.

"And a little child shall lead them".

### Broadcast

St Martin's is good at broadcasting, less good at narrow-casting but the service for Christmas morning managed both. It included 2 contributions from experts on homelessness about their being no room for Mary, Joseph and the baby in the inn. Walter said that God knew what it meant

to be an outsider and have nothing. Jesus was born with nothing and we leave the earth with nothing. “What is the point if you have everything in the world but do not help your brothers and sisters”, he said.

He also observed what had never occurred to me before that the first people told about the birth of Jesus by the angels were shepherds, who were rough sleepers on the hills around Bethlehem. So this is a community in which homeless people can be our teachers. It is also a whole community in which we look after and have a care for each other, where people are in fact very generous. The BBC Radio 4 St Martin-in-the-Fields Christmas Appeal is an annual appeal to support our work with homeless people through The Connection at St Martin’s as well as people in need all over the country. As you might imagine there has been a good deal of anxiety about the impact of the economy on the Appeal and at the same time cuts in public spending are just having an impact on what we are able to do for homeless people so the success of the Appeal this year really matters. On Friday the appeal topped, for the first time ever, £1 million. This is almost miraculous. I think it is still true that the average donation of about £65/£70 so although there are some larger donations the extraordinary response is made up of thousands of gifts. It helps that the weather has been very cold. Sally Flatman, the Producer as well as member of the congregation, has done a lot of work on using new media such as Facebook and Twitter and the BBC were so generous with their broadcasts, including the very compelling short trailers which included Richard Carter telling of the homeless man who gave someone his shoes because they needed them more than he did. But it is also true that the economy has made people more aware of our vulnerability and that instead of closing people down it has opened us up on the principle of ‘do to others as you would have them do to you’.

### **Pastoral Care**

A church in Central London is mostly made up of the fit and healthy because people have to be able to get here. That can be tough on the sick and elderly and it has been a very tough winter and a number of the congregation have had falls or got sick and several are terminally ill. It has been impressive to see the community care for one another. In the early Church an outsider was impressed by the relationships between the congregations and commented, “See these Christians, how they love one another”. You can’t always say that about the Church of England but it is true of St Martin’s and Christ can be seen in the way people have looked after each other.

### **Worship**

The diversity of styles of worship, from the formality of Nine Lessons and Carols and Midnight Mass to the organised chaos of the Crib Service has been striking but so has the quality of attentiveness. There has been participation, wonder and beauty in our worship drawing us to the holiness of the child at the heart of our celebrations. In worship we find ourselves truly in relationship with God and one another and all creation, losing ourselves in response to another, the other. In worship we find ourselves in relation to God and one another and all creation. It renews our faith, hope and love, the things St Paul said are eternal.

All of these are particular ways in which in this Christmas at St Martin’s we have seen Jesus, and we will each have seen many more in church, in work and the city around us, at home and with family. Put them together and what we begin to see is the grand story of God come among us in the infant Jesus, Emmanuel, of light in 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.”