

# CHRISTMAS 2018

## Preached in Exeter Cathedral

Christmas turns everything upside down. I don't mean in the sense of disrupting our routine, but in the sense of challenging the way we live.

Shot through the events that took place two thousand years ago on that first Christmas is the exhilarating sense of God coming into a divided world and inviting us to share in his project of renewing creation.

The extraordinary power of this realisation came home to me in a slightly odd way. Rummaging through packs of Christmas cards at a charity card sale last month, I was dismayed by the lady standing next to me. Inspecting a pack of cards featuring the wise men kneeling at the foot of the manger, she discarded it with the words, 'All these religious cards. You can't find a decent Christmas card anywhere these days.'

I declined to deliver a homily on the true meaning of Christmas, not least because I was having the reverse difficulty. Trying to find anything remotely religious which wasn't either crass or gooey amongst myriad pictures of Father Christmas, reindeer and snowmen was nigh impossible.

If *you* were lucky enough to find a decent Christmas card this year, it's worth remembering that the events were not as tidy or as pretty as they are invariably depicted. Nor were they orchestrated by the media or by the ruling classes. The witnesses of the events were not celebrities, but shepherds. The central character was not a powerful ruler, but a vulnerable baby. His parents were neither rich nor sophisticated, but simple peasants who were probably illiterate.

These are the extraordinary events which millions of people across the world commemorate today. We celebrate and sing because in the birth of Jesus Christ we recognise the love of God breaking into human lives and changing our world, turning things upside down.

That said, as often on Christmas Day, I find myself living with competing feelings. The season of conspicuous consumption has arrived, but I'm not much in the mood for hilarity. Doubtless the prospect of good food and wine will win through in the end. It usually does. Few of us can live

with the burden of constant self-scrutiny. As T. S. Eliot says in one of his poems 'Humankind cannot bear very much reality.'

And to be honest, Christmas comes as a welcome distraction from the endless talk about Brexit. It seems incredible to think that seven years ago the word hadn't been invented. Since the referendum two years ago, the word now dominates our headlines and conversations.

And if that is not enough, there is the tsunami in Indonesia, the humanitarian disaster resulting from the wars in Syria and Yemen, depressing pictures of our oceans choked with plastic, and increasing numbers of homeless people curled up in shop doorways. Thank goodness for the work of St Petrock's and other charities this Christmas.

In the midst of this doom and gloom come yet more headlines – except these headlines purport to come from God. The bewildered shepherds hear the angels sing: 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace: goodwill towards all people.' Are these headlines as real as the human misery we witness on our television screens? Or is this yet more 'fake news'?

I believe it as real as the event that provoked the headlines in the first place: a new-born baby craving for his mother's milk in an obscure Palestinian town to which his parents had been forced to travel by the occupying Roman army because of the census the authorities were conducting.

The Gospel of Luke has a particular way of emphasising the historical basis of these events. Eight times in the first two chapters of his Gospel, when dealing with the birth of Jesus, Luke uses the same formula, 'And it came to pass'. Modern translations of the Bible tend to regard such expressions as archaic and omit them, but they're there in the original Greek manuscripts. The old King James Bible, however, translates Luke's words identically each time: 'and it came to pass'. Not for the first time, the old King James Bible is both more accurate than modern translations where, for all their scholarship, the meaning is literally 'lost in translation'.

I mention this because there is a tendency to think that religious belief is primarily about interpreting our lives in a spiritual sense. In part it's true, but it's not enough. On its own, seeing the Christian faith simply as a religious interpretation of life collapses faith into a subjective journey, a matter of personal opinion: you tell me your truth and I'll tell you mine.

The New Testament pictures this approach as a house built upon sand, with no proper foundations. Built on the cheap, it may look impressive, but when the winds blow, it's liable to collapse. Of course faith is personal, but in the Christian understanding it is built upon the solid rock of history, something which did indeed 'come to pass' two thousand years ago in Bethlehem in Judea, when as Luke tells us, Quirinius was governor in Syria, and Augustus was Emperor in Rome.

'I bring you news of great joy, a joy to be shared by all the people. To you in the city of David, a saviour has been born. He is Christ the Lord.' Unlike some fake news in circulation, the birth of Jesus Christ was real and it is good news. Frustratingly, the message of God's love for his creation is something humankind is reluctant to hear. Perhaps because if we take its implications seriously, it challenges the way we live.

God's loving embrace embodied in the birth of Jesus Christ is for *all* people, everywhere. God's love is not selective. God has no favourites. God loves both the Russians and the Americans, both Iranians and Saudis, both Israelis and Palestinians, both us Brits and our fellow Europeans. God even loves you and me.

And that's why we are sometimes reluctant to hear the message of the angels. It challenges our prejudices about other people and nations. It challenges our inherent tribalism. It challenges us not to escape into a safe, privatized world, but to bridge the gap between our Christmas dinner and the homeless people sleeping in shop doorways, between our soul and what happens in the world.

Today we take this uncomfortable tension into our heart and turn it into prayer because like our generous God, we are called to exercise peace and good will towards *all* people, not just some.

As always, the danger is that we have the experience of Christmas but miss its meaning. Come Boxing Day, feelings of peace and goodwill evaporate and we sink back, closing eyes to injustice, inequality, and suffering. But it doesn't have to be like that. The God we see revealed in the birth of Jesus Christ is a God of truth as well as love, a God of justice as well as mercy.

And the truth is there is enough food in the world to feed all the hungry, if we have the political will to bring it about. The truth is we can refuse to nurse resentment or allow prejudice to divide communities and families.

The truth is we can reject a lifestyle which ransacks the world's resources and leaves our oceans polluted with millions of tons of plastic. In this life, we do have choices.

If Christmas is to bring a message of good news for *all* people then it must lead us to reimagine our world order. This Christmas I invite you to pray with me that the God of all hope will re-ignite our goodwill and re-shape the choices we make on a daily basis so that together we work for a better, more just society.

+ Robert Exon