

Sermon | Midnight Mass | 2020

Revd Matt Wood | Life-saving news

Scrolling idly through Facebook the other day, I happened upon a trailer for a film. You might have seen it. It's for the recently released box office smash: the St John's Ranmoor Nativity - Nativi-tier 3

In stark lettering, words bellow out from the screen...

'This year... is different'.

Well, I think we can all agree with this statement...

So, here we are on Christmas Eve... this most holy night, [gathered in church and at home], maybe feeling a little bewildered. Struggling to make sense of all that's going on... searching for something...

Ordinarily this night would bring up a multitude of feelings and ideas that we would find hard to express. This year, even more than usual, we may be wondering what on earth is going on... searching all the harder for some understanding...

So, what can we say of a night like this where everything seems so very small and very large, very close and very distant, very tangible and very elusive?

We feel a sense of familiarity and comfort in the intimacy of the nativity scene. We can place ourselves there huddled in the cold with Mary and Joseph watching quietly in the stable amidst the steaming breath and soft rustlings of the animals. We can feel part of this most human and familiar scene. We're so close, we can almost reach out and touch the baby.

There's a similar intimacy to a scene in the film 'The Passion of the Christ' in which we focus painfully closely on the bruised face and abused body of Jesus on the cross but then, at the moment he breathes his last, our view pulls rapidly away, up... up... into what we imagine is God's perspective, and we suddenly can see... everything.

These two views of Christ help to highlight a difference between the accounts of Jesus' birth in the gospels. It's Luke's account that we probably remember most from our childhood. Here are the familiar close-up narrative details about the journey to Bethlehem and the birth in the cattle shed:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.

We could probably recite much of it by heart.

In contrast, the prologue to John's gospel pans out to give us a vast, widescreen vista... we learn the fundamental truth behind the nativity story... and it starts, tellingly, with the same words we hear in Genesis chapter one: In the beginning...

John reminds us of the power of the creative love of God. Here is a love and a longing for relationship with his creation that overflows to the extent that he enters into our world to show himself to us. Jesus is the lens through which we meet God.

... and John distills into just nine simple words, what is, for us, the most glorious life-saving news:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us

It was many years ago at a carol concert that I first heard John Betjeman's poem 'Christmas'...

At the time I thought, like many others when he was made Poet Laureate, that his poetry was rather lighter than was fit for such a weighty honour.

I felt, rather naively, that in the words: 'and is it true? And is it true', he was questioning the truth of the incarnation. Now, when I read these words, I hear not a questioning of the incarnation, but a sense of incredulity that I hope I never lose.

I hope that none of us ever fails to be hit in the face by the sheer implausibility of the news that God came to earth as a baby to live among us.

So quietly, he came... naked, vulnerable, a homeless stranger, asking us if we can believe that a tiny child is able to bear the weight of glory that he brings. His coming is a wonderful truth that is both a challenge to us and the offer of a choice. Will we receive and walk in the light that Jesus brings, or will we continue to walk in darkness?

The messy and chaotic world into which Christ was born two thousand years ago is probably something we feel we recognise today. But the incarnate God does not dictate to us what we must do. It is his coming as a shivering child in an ox's stall that allows us the room to choose. Here is a love that is fierce enough to forge universes and gentle enough that even the weakest is free to choose. Rowan Williams puts it beautifully:

He will come, will come
will come like crying in the night,
like blood, like breaking,
as the earth writhes to toss him free.
He will come like child.

So, Jesus does not remove us from reality... he joins us where we are, here in our humanness... and our understanding of reality changes... we become more able to see it with his eyes... overflowing with love.

Amidst the comforting narrative of Jesus birth we must never lose sight of the fact that his earthly story is one of cradle and cross... of cattle stall and crucifixion... where God's love for us is revealed both in the vulnerability of a child and in Jesus' atoning death on Good Friday.

As John's prologue reminds us, the nativity we celebrate tonight is part of an even bigger picture... this is a new work... this is our re-creation in the image of God... this is our being given an opportunity to choose to live like Christ... to say every morning:

Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born in us today

This year, our lives and our plans have been turned upside down by something outside our control.

And here we are, we've made a choice. We've gathered together in church and online in the middle of the night... this night... this most holy night to wait and watch in the darkness for the light of which we've heard the prophets tell:

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.

We have chosen to bring our confusion, our loss of the familiar into God's radiant light... and as we creep in to look at the baby lying in the hay, we long to feel that we might change into the kind of people who could always sense the presence of the angels and respond with love and kindness to the world around us.

And John reminds us in nine simple words that on this most holy night, at Christmas and every day and for ever, with God, nothing is impossible.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us.