

Christmass – Mass of the Day 2016

This is morning we are, as it were, waking up with a hangover and wondering what on earth happened last night! If you were here last night you would have heard the story of the birth of Jesus told by Luke. It involved all the usual characters Mary and Joseph with their accommodation problems, the birth, the shepherds, the angels. That's what occurred last night, today requires of us some sober reflection and John provides us with just that! 'In the beginning was the Word' we have just heard these majestic words from the prologue to John's gospel. Sometimes folk have said to me why do we have to have this reading, why can't we just have the story of the nativity again? It's too hard, folk won't understand it! I have some sympathy with that; but on the other hand shall we then do away with 'O come all ye faithful?' Look at the second verse 'God of God, light of light, lo he abhors not the Virgins womb, very God, begotten not created.' If I decided to do away with that carol because it's 'too hard' I would be howled down, and quite rightly so! Yes, what we are celebrating is like the Holy Trinity easy to sing about difficult sometimes to grasp.

We here at St Philip's lay claim to a particular charism, a particular gift that we want to offer, a particular style, a particular way. We are not better than anyone else, far from it, we are not trying to corner a piece of the market or secure a particular niche. It's not that we do things particularly differently, truth be known we're rather Anglican. It is something that is intangible, difficult to grasp or put a finger on. Different folk will see it in different ways, it will mean different things to different folk. I've only been here a short while as many of you know, I'm still discovering this gift that we offer to the community around us and to the wider church. I was encouraged by the Archdeacon and the Clergy Appointments Board to 'Come and See,' and I am increasingly thinking it is that statement which lies at the beginning of understanding what we are about.

There are very many misconceptions about the Christian faith, many of them are extremely deeply held and I have found them to be almost impossible to shift. They are so deeply held that even I find myself falling victim to these ideas. They should have been drummed out of me by my training and study but they are stubborn, they are hard to shift. The principle misconception is that you have to be something, bring something, offer something, sacrifice something before God will, in some way, take notice and deign to, as it were, 'come down.' I understand this thinking, it is a hangover from the distant past, but for many it is quite real. Folk at different times have said to me I'd better not come to church, the roof might fall in! Or they might say on leaving a service 'well that's another instalment on my fire insurance.' They are joking yes but these jokes belie a deeply held understanding of the nature of God...which is quite wrong! Even our carols can sometimes lead us down this path.

Think of in the Bleak mid-winter: 'What can I give him, poor as I am. If I were a shepherd I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man I would do my part; yet what

can I give him, give my heart.' There is implied this sense of needing to bring something to be accepted.

The Shepherds in the fields that night were probably a rough and ready bunch. Shepherds were among the lowliest of workers. Hired by the owners of the flocks for a pittance to care for the sheep, to find pasture and water and to ward off the many wild animals, as well as those who would steal the livestock. The scriptures are littered with allusions to shepherds, indeed Jesus described himself as the Good shepherd and in doing so aligned himself with these poor farm workers. We are not told a lot about what happened that night but quite clearly they were told in an angelic vision about this great event that had taken place and they said to themselves...let us 'go and see.' They would have come empty handed, the lambs weren't theirs to give, they came just as they were to 'see this thing that has come to pass.' John in his words is telling us what exactly it is that has 'come to pass.'

What has come to pass is the life of God spilling over into creation. God from God, light from light, the energy that is God's Word filling the world, focussed on a child, in extremely unlikely circumstances in a backwater of declining empire. There are no demands, no commands. God doesn't crash through but in becoming one of us makes us different, makes human life unrecognisable. As we see through the fog of our hangover we should be looking at everyone with absolute amazement and I mean everyone! Even those whose lives and beliefs and cultures are different from ours, alien, their lives have been imbued, filled, soaked with this same specialness!

But this is not easy, of course we struggle we see that struggle every night on the news, on our computers or iPads etc. It is frightening, this vulnerability; it is right that we should be alarmed by the radical claims we are making this morning. Annie Dillard was a writer back in the seventies she wrote in *Pilgrim at Tinkers Creek*: Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or as I suspect does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should be issues life preservers and signal flare; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping God may awake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return. She of course is employing a significant dose of hyperbole. But I am sure you get the drift.

All God, in Jesus, is saying is 'come and see.' See what has come to pass and then in that light open yourself to a new way of being. I hope that in and through our celebrations we can glimpse the immensity of what has come to pass and that we can overcome that which would hold us back and 'Come and See'..... a happy and holy Christmass to you all! Amen.