

Christmass Eve 2017

My news feed on my tablet is becoming an unwanted intruder! It flashes and beeps and try as I might I resist its call. It did this yesterday and up came the same old pre-Christmas story again. This didn't happen like this you know. There wasn't really an Inn or shepherds or wise men, the Greek New Testament says this... etc etc. I turned it off! Not because it upsets my faith or offends me in some way, but because *I have heard it all before*.

I have too many books! And during the year I inherited a whole lot more. Amongst the volumes were books that I had heard of but never read, perhaps the most well-known being 'Honest to God' the 1963 book by John AT Robinson the then Bishop of Woolwich in the UK. The book caused a scandal in its day, and so it quickly became a best seller. It was a bit before my time and not required reading for modern theologs, but I have enjoyed dipping into its pages.

Robinson followed up the book with another called 'But that I can't believe' that one was also in the collection I inherited. A third book was also there called 'The honest to God debate' a book about the book. Let me give you a sample, this is from 'But that I can't believe' the chapter is simply called Christmas: '*But you can't really believe that lot can you? Stars stopping over cribs, angelic choirs lighting up the skies, God coming to earth as a man – like a visitor from outer space?*' Robinson, like the writer on my news feed, wanted to make Christianity and Christmas relevant, an admirable aim, but I wonder if it is flawed one. After all, here we are in the middle of the night listening with rapt attention to the account in Luke's gospel. It is the 21st century we are urban dwelling, educated, often scientifically minded, largely professional folk. Why!? I don't believe that we are necessarily seeking relevance. There are too many other ways to do that.

Piles of books have been gathering and growing around desks, chairs and beds in the Rectory. One of them is a good book a called: Is Belief in God Good, Bad or Irrelevant? A Professor and a Punk Rocker Discuss Science, Religion, Naturalism & Christianity. It's a series of letters between an Academic and the front man of a punk band, it made for easy reading amidst the theological wrestling. In one letter the professor wrestles with the problems of human pain. He writes of the problems of the developing world, childhood diseases, terrorism, reality TV...it's a wide ranging rant. But then he goes on to say that we but don't turn our backs on these things, painful as they are, seemingly absurd as they; we mustn't.

Consider the Book of Ecclesiastes now there's a great read if you're feeling just a little cynical or world weary. There it is right in middle of the canon of the Bible: *I, the Teacher, when king over Israel in Jerusalem, applied my mind to seek and to search out by wisdom all that is done under heaven; it is an unhappy business that God has given to human beings to be busy*

with. I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind. And that's just a small sample there are twelve chapters of it, why? Why there in the Bible?

Another book in those piles is one I mention often - 'Brideshead Revisited.' Charles Ryder the narrator is cynical, resigned, world-weary and sceptical. He calls it 'his fierce little human tragedy.' But in the end he discovers glimpses of meaning - 'I found it this morning burning anew among the old stones.' Absurdity and meaning, seemingly paradoxical yes, but I wonder. As the professor wrote to the punk rocker - There's plenty to suggest that today's ridiculous event is the precursor to tomorrow's big thing!

So back to our question: why are you urban dwelling, educated, often scientifically minded, largely professional folk, sitting there now, are you seeking relevance? I doubt it very much. Perhaps you haven't thought much about it, perhaps you always do this on Christmas Eve. On one level it does seem absurd, but what the scriptures seem to say is that absurdity accompanies metaphysical meaning; we won't find answers, or clarity or relevance but we will place ourselves in a situation where we can glimpse something of the divine in the seemingly absurd, in the apparent meaninglessness of the things that occur in our world.

John AT Robinson in writing *Honest to God* did a great service to the church on one level. He reminded us of the difficulty involved in believing these Biblical accounts. He helped us to appreciate that much of what goes on in our world appears absurd at one level and yet so much of it with reflection and time is also replete with meaning. When the shepherds experienced those heavenly beings there is every chance that they were just a little world-weary, it was not an easy life and we could expect them to discount the message. Peace on earth!? But the scriptures tell us that nonetheless they went out of curiosity. Luke tells us after visiting the child: they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were *amazed* at what the shepherds told them. In the old translations those who heard the news wondered at what the shepherds told them. They didn't wonder as in question, but were *filled with wonder*.

When like the professor we struggle with the world and its pain or when we face like Charles Ryder our own 'fierce little human tragedy' we must engage with its absurdity because it may be the next big thing! Consider an experience of great indescribable joy, beauty, love or peace, do you consider its relevance? I doubt it very much. Fortunately the shepherds didn't seek relevance in the message, it was absurd, terrifying and beautiful and it is my hope that we too can hear that news that the shepherds brought and be filled with wonder. It is *the* antidote to our world weariness and it is the reason why we are here this evening. Absurd? Perhaps just a little. Relevant? Depends! Wonderful yes! Almighty God, the hope and dreams of all the years are met in thee tonight and we are filled with wonder. Amen, and a very holy and happy Christmas to you all.