

# THE DARK NIGHT OF THE WORLD

## Sermon at the Midnight Eucharist

Reading: St Luke 2. 1-20.

ONCE in royal David's City  
Stood a lowly cattle shed,  
Where a mother laid her baby  
In a manger for his bed.

The lowly cattle shed, the stable of Bethlehem, frames the familiar nativity scene. It doesn't matter that St Luke, in the reading we have just heard, never mentions the stable, any more than he mentions that popular figure of every nativity play, the innkeeper. He mentions the inn, so we infer the innkeeper; he mentions the manger, so we infer the cattle shed or stable; and because the Prophet Isaiah, centuries before, had spoken of the ox and the ass who knew their master's crib, so we add the ox and the ass to the nativity scene. It is a scene we can all picture, rooted in our earliest childhood memories of Christmas, and worked upon by carol-writers and artists down the centuries. No church service is more popular than the crib service; no school event more sweated over, and sometimes fought over, than the nativity play.

Something deep within us craves the stable and the crib, and that picture of the sudden gift of light and warmth and welcome in the 'cold winter's night'. We respond to the story of the Christchild, a child of such promise, born in circumstances that were so unpromising, so unwelcoming, and (when King Herod enters the story) so life-threatening. The story of the birth of Christ reminds us of other births – stories of babies born during air-raids or earthquakes or road accidents – sometimes miraculously surviving, sometimes not. These are stories that speak both of the fragility of our lives and of our extraordinary resilience in the face of hardship and danger. They tell of the glory and the terror of being human.

At the end of another year in which we have all been painfully aware of our fragility in the face of the pandemic; a year which has tested our collective and individual resilience to breaking-point; a year which has brought grief and loss, illness and anxiety and depression, to so many, we crave all the more 'to go even unto Bethlehem and to see this thing which is come to pass, and the babe lying in the manger'. We long for the assurance of that gift of light and warmth and welcome in our

cold winter's night, the dark night of Covid that covers the whole world, a night which not one of us has known before, and which seems to go on and on.

There are, of course, those who say that the Christmas story is a case of whistling in the dark to keep up our spirits. The darkness is *there*, the darkness is *real*, the pandemic is happening, the suffering is unavoidable - so we recount the familiar tale of the birth of Christ as a universal bedtime story. It will help us to sleep.

Why do I believe that the birth of Christ is more than that? Because I believe that the birth of Christ is the moment when the Creator of all things stepped into the world of his own making, entered our story, and took upon himself the glory and the terror of being human. Because I believe that the birth of Christ is only the start of a longer story, the story of the man Jesus preaching the love of God, and with forgiveness facing the fury of his enemies, and submitting to an agonizing death, and rising above even that with the life-giving power of his resurrection. And because I believe *that*, I see in all the *other* stories of human resilience – babies born during air-raids or earthquakes or road accidents; or the heroes of the pandemic – the doctors and the nurses and the good neighbours and all who have given and given again to meet the needs of their fellow-human-beings – in all *those* stories of human resilience, I see something of the same mercy of God which I also see in the birth and life and death and resurrection of Christ. And in the birth and life and death and resurrection of Christ, I find the clue to making sense of the world, not a case of whistling in the dark to keep up my spirits, but a matter of finding some light in the dark by which to live my life. And because I believe that Jesus Christ rose above death with the life-giving power of his resurrection, I believe that my death, and your death, and the deaths of all whom we have loved and lost, is not the end of any of us, but the love of God continues to hold us in life. And so it is that I believe that

... our eyes at last shall see him  
Through his own redeeming love,  
For that child so dear and gentle  
Is our Lord in heaven above;  
And he leads his children on  
To the place where he is gone.

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