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Bishop Ruth’s Christmas Sermon

An ordinary night, a peaceful night offering no disturbance

unless from the odd wolf, or the silly strayer

that might mean a long search in the darkness

when ninety-nine were behaving themselves.

They did not think they were particularly good shepherds –

just men with a job to do, flocks and families to keep,

quiet men, not highly regarded in the courts and cities.

The glory of the Lord was not something that concerned them:

the Rabbi might have mentioned it in forgotten schooldays

as appearing to Moses, Elijah and such great ones.

It was not for them, but it came upon them,

it shone, revealed, terrified,

and brought words of peace, comfort, favour –

little enough of them in the cold fields –

and of the Messiah all hoped for, few expected,

all because of a birth in a little place. Not far off.

Somehow the glory, the promises, so far above them,

were really for them, startled night watchers,

because that child was lying in a manger

born among their own kind, the simple people

who would be around on an ordinary night.

Raymond Chapman ‘Stations of the Nativity, Cross and Resurrection’

You can just imagine those shepherds on the hill, gazing out at the moon, minding their own business, when suddenly the extraordinary happens. They find themselves in the middle of the most amazing story. They were men who were not easily frightened. They were strong and able to deal with anything that might threaten their livelihood. Their sheep meant the difference between survival and starvation. It would take a lot to terrify them!

The circumstances of this night were to change their lives and ours. They abandoned their flocks of sheep, unheard of, and went to see what was turning their world upside down.

This past year or two has seen our world turn upside down. But not for good. It has brought fear and anxiety, terror and uncertainty. Our family lives, our livelihoods have been dramatically affected by the pandemic. We are waiting for what might happen next. On the alert for the next twist in the tale. Perhaps we are kept awake at night, worrying, rather than going about our business.

Our wakefulness, our fear, may be for very different reasons than those shepherds, but tonight we too can be comforted by the message of the angels. The message of Christmas is one of good news. Something we can celebrate and that will bring joy. Why?

How was the birth of a baby going to change the world of those first century shepherds? Surely what they really needed was a powerful force to come and liberate their country to ensure that they didn’t just live hand to mouth but could take possession of what was rightfully theirs, their own land? That could have fixed their immediate problem.

Too often we find ourselves looking at the immediate problem and the need to resolve it. We don’t often see the world beyond. Much of our current climate crisis is due to us finding commercial solutions to meet our growing industrial need. We didn’t foresee what that might cause over a longer period of time.

The birth of a baby two thousand years ago was for all time. Jesus came not as a quick fix to the world’s problems but rather as One who wanted to live amongst those He created, as one of us. A God who chooses the weakness and vulnerability of human form, rather than retaining his godly status. In order to be close to the ones He loved… us, those shepherds, you and me.

That is some love. To choose the uncertainty of human existence over and above the power of the creative force. To long to be close to those you love and care for. Many of us have some understanding of such love. Of love that causes us to want to be near to the one we love. Some of us have been denied that closeness during this pandemic, unable to be present with family members whilst they have suffered illness or lay dying. It has caused much pain and strengthened our longing to reclaim the values of love, friendship and family.

Last Christmas my husband went down with Covid and so we had to isolate. Many of you found the restrictions over last Christmas meant that travel to visit family was impossible. This year, many of us will be excited to have loved ones around us once more. But let us remember too, those for whom Christmas is a lonely time, the bereaved, the excluded, the lost, those who have left homes far behind. It is to them as well as to us, that Jesus comes, into the stable of our lives, into the cradle of our love. And as we remember that giving of himself for love of us, let us ask ourselves how we might do the same.

‘The Coming’

And God held in his hand

A small globe. Look, he said.

The son looked. Far off,

As through water, he saw

A scorched land of fierce

Colour. The light burned

There; crusted buildings

Cast their shadows; a bright

Serpent, a river

Uncoiled itself, radiant

With slime.

On a bare

Hill a bare tree saddened

The sky. Many people

Held out their thin arms

To it, as though waiting

For a vanished April

To return to its crossed

Boughs. The son watched

Them. Let me go there, he said.

R.S Thomas