

A Community of love

Revd. Jon Hutchinson, 25 December 2020

I've been thinking about how many ways we find to tell the Christmas Story. We do it from just about every angle conceivable.

I've read the story in children's picture books from the point of view of the donkey that Mary rode on to Bethlehem, from the camel who brings the gifts for the wise men, the mouse in the stable, the other animals in the stable. I've heard a version that relies heavily on the star in the sky and if it didn't shine there would be trouble (I loved that one – it was at a Primary school with years 1,2 and 3).

Last week our neighbours Dreamcatchers came over for their nativity and this year's story was the sleepy Shepherd.

I do recall a James Bond themed Nativity that became somewhat controversial that was back in 1999.

The story I have used this year at the School Christingles was the wonderful "Jesus Christmas Party" by Nicholas Allan, It was first printed in 1991 by Hutchinson Children's Books – no relation, I won't be getting Royalties.

We try and find as many ways as possible to present the wonderful, familiar story.

Our reading from Luke's gospel sets out the birth in quite a matter of fact way. It tells us when it happened historically, where it happened geographically, and that it happened somewhat awkwardly with the little family finding shelter in a stable.

It's the story of the Shepherds that's given more space than the actual birth. Our focus is on them and Luke has good reason to highlight their role in the story.

Bethlehem is the home of King David – the Shepherd King. The Messiah would come from David's city.

The Shepherds care for the sacrificial lambs taken to Jerusalem for use in the temple.

Jesus is the Good Shepherd and King who offers himself as the sacrificial lamb of God – the title John the Baptist gives him.

There's something else that occurs that reminds us of what Jesus came to achieve. Those moments after a birth are especially poignant and wonderful...even in a stable/cave. The birth of a child is a time for wonder. I recall being with Katherine and holding each of our babies and not long after sharing the news, family and our closest friends who are family anyway.

Into this tender moment, the shepherds arrive and bring their story and join the holy family in adoration and wonder. Complete strangers are welcomed and a grotty stable becomes a home and strangers become family.

God's Kingdom is one of welcome, of family, of belonging and of hope. I've seen and experienced this myself many times, as someone who comes to church for the first time is embraced and welcomed and is at home, so much so that within a few weeks you can't remember them not being a part of the church.

Shepherds were usually outcasts from society. At Jesus birth the poor and lowly are welcomed – the news is given to them first and they are welcomed in.

In the same way we have a multitude of ways of telling the Christmas story, our many songs and carols examine every part of Jesus birth.

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Some are very directly from the bible story – SO - The first Nowell the Angel did say was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay... taken from today's reading

Some carols don't miss out on the opportunity to do a bit of direct teaching...like "Once in Royal David's city".

From verse 3
Christian children all should be
kind, obedient, good as he.
(so – that's you told!)

And many others carols extend the story of Christmas to encompass the Christian message of salvation like the Holly and the Ivy and Good Christians all rejoice.

I asked Katherine to record some carol tunes to use in the mini Advent videos and one piece was the carol "I saw three ships come sailing in".

I love the tune and I love Katherine's playing but hearing it over and over as I edited the films I realised I knew nothing about it. What on earth are these three ships about and how do they sail to Bethlehem which is landlocked?

There are various suggestions...you can look them up, but the tune, like so many others is part of my sound track of Christmas.

I was recalling my father's favourite carol, which isn't as well known as the most popular ones.

"Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
All for love's sake becamest poor;
Thrones for a manger didst surrender,

Sapphire-paved courts for stable floor.
Thou who wast rich beyond all splendour,
All for love's sake becamest poor.

The scene Luke paints for us, a stable, Jesus birth, the visit from the Shepherds, is captured in the poetry of the verse. How God comes to us, Immanuel – God with us, not ashamed to be poor, an outcast, all for love's sake, all to welcome us into the Father's embrace.

The final verse is one of worship and prayer, the only response we can make on Christmas Day.

Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Saviour and King, we worship thee.
Emmanuel, within us dwelling,
Make us what thou wouldst have us be.
Thou who art love beyond all telling,
Saviour and King, we worship thee."

Whatever your circumstances this year, restricted as we are by the need for caution, anxious about the future, sorrowful at all we have endured and lost and suffered – may you know the joy and peace of Emmanuel, be caught up again in the joy of God coming to us and know yourself to be welcomed.