

Sermon Christmas Rod Prince

May our hearts be open to the word of God and may I speak in the name of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit

How many of you have received book tokens for Christmas? I have two books that I would like to recommend to you. The first is a novel "Salmon fishing in the Yemen" by Paul Torday and the second is "Glory in our midst" by Michael Perham, who until 2005 was the Dean of Derby Cathedral and is now Bishop of Gloucester. My address today borrows heavily from both these books.

Salmon fishing in the Yemen is about a ruler a Sheikh, who has a dream to introduce salmon into the mountain streams of the Yemen. In order to achieve this almost impossible dream he employs a highly sceptical scientist. Gradually the scientist is won round. Towards the end of the book the scientist hears the words of the sheikh "I taught you to take the first step; to learn to believe in belief. And one day you will take the second step and find what it is you believe in".

As its Christmas let's have some good news. Attendances at cathedrals are growing year on year. This year over 7,000 people will attend services during Christmas week at Derby Cathedral. Despite the cynicism of the media it is clear that people with no faith increasingly recognise that, to use a hackneyed phrase, they have a "God-shaped hole" in their lives. There is a desire, I think a basic human desire, to believe in belief. Christmas provides a unique opportunity for all Christians to share the joy of believing in belief with those searching to fill that gap in their lives. Christmas provides us not just with a chance to believe in belief but for those of us blessed to have reached that first stage a moment when we can remind ourselves what it is we believe in .

Whether you have been a parent or not whenever you hold a newborn child in your arms you cannot but be filled with wonder. In your hands is a life with seemingly boundless potential. You believe that suddenly all things are possible. Looking into the crib on that first Christmas morning the wonder was far greater. For there looking back at you lying in that rough hewn trough was God. God comes to us, not in a way that demands our worship but in complete vulnerability, seeking our freely given love.

Michael Perham, in his book Glory in our Midst, sees the Inn in the Christmas story as standing for the world of the everyday, with its joys, laughter, friendship and sorrow. It is a place full of mixed emotions and into the middle of it comes Jesus Christ, happy to share with us the messiness of our lives.

Jesus turns the world order upside down. To have followed the practice of the world he would have been born in a palace, befitting his status. The high priests, rulers and nobility would have been the first to know and eventually the news would have filtered down, doubtless in a carefully managed way. But He did not choose that route. Instead the poor were the first to know; those on the margins of society, scraping a living on the exposed slopes of Bethlehem looking after the sheep of the wealthy. The manner of Jesus's birth teaches us that in order to follow Christ we must put concerns about society aside and focus only on Christ. Jesus is the God who pitches his tent in a world of refugees, tyrants, drunken revellers spilling out of the inn of life. And so, for the Church to be true to its calling it too must be a community that welcomes and includes without reservation those that the world classes as misfits and those at the margins of society.

The birth of Jesus Christ offers redemption for us all. Gregory of Nazianus, one of the early church fathers encourages us to "Honour this tiny Bethlehem which restores us to paradise". He calls the birth a miracle not so much creation rather re-creation. That possibility of re-creation is open to all of us. St Paul in 2 Corinthians 5.17 says "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation, everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. The birth of Christ enables us to be re-born into the love of God.

Perhaps more than any other service, Midnight Mass and Christmas morning Eucharist are so very special because they encapsulate the whole of Christ's redemptive life on earth. We start our service at His birth placing the baby Jesus into the crib and move on through the words of the Eucharist to His passion, the cross and to His glorious resurrection. The road from Bethlehem leads ultimately to Calvary. So we move from the manger to the altar from the crib to the cross. The baby in the manger grows to be a boy and matures into manhood. And the man's body is taken and beaten, reviled, scourged and crucified.

When we were coming to the end of our training the Readers were asked to contribute a piece of writing that was important to them in their journey of faith. The book was given to the readers in the year behind us to encourage them on their journey. One of the poems was Christmas by John Betjemen. I will read the final verse:

No love that in a family dwells

No carolling in frosty air
Nor all the Steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single truth compare
That God was man in Palestine
And lives today in Bread and Wine

Later in this service Bob will lift the bread over which he has said the words "This is my body which is given for you" God is not remote. He comes to us in the physical and the material as well as the spiritual. God has come to us on earth in bodily form; as a child lying in a manger, as a man crucified for us on a cross and today He comes to his people in bread and wine and in so doing gives them his body and his blood so that we might live in Him and He in us.

And so just as every Eucharist is a not just a little Calvary it is also a little Bethlehem.

I hope that at some point amid the rush and frantic activity of Christmas you will set aside a quiet moment to make your own journey to Bethlehem to visit that stable and to look with wonder at the babe lying in the manger as Betjemen puts it "The maker of the stars and sea become a child on earth for me?"

And whilst you are there, renew your belief in belief, remember what it is you believe in, give thanks for your Christian faith and promise to share the joy of that belief with others in your daily life.

Happy Christmas
Amen