

**An Address by Bill Pattinson for Christmas 1 (27.12.2020):
Dancing in the Light of Christ: transforming the ordinary into the
extraordinary.**

One of the joys of Christmas is that we always do the same sort of things every year - the family round the table, the games we play, the food we eat, the TV programmes we watch, the church services we attend - we create our own traditions. As Steve Turner writes:

“The thing about Christmas
I always think that
Is that it stays the same
Always like that
And that’s why I love it
I love it like that
Everything else changes
But we always do that.”

Well, not this year! This year, as the politicians constantly told us in the run up to Christmas, was completely different, a Christmas like no other - and we shall all have our own stories of how we coped during Christmas 2020, the year of the pandemic. One thing however did not change, nor will it ever. As John Betjeman writes:

“The maker of the stars and sea
Became a child on earth for me.... and you.”

That wonderful story, of which we never tire, the birth of the Saviour of the world in a simple stable in Bethlehem, remains the same. And let me tell you immediately that the tweet on social media that there was indeed room at the inn, but the stable was more ventilated, is fake news. There has indeed been many jokes on the media about the pandemic - it’s a very British way of coping. One of my favourites is a rewording of the lyrics for Good King Wenceslas.

“Yonder peasant who is he?
He’s not from tier 4 is he?”

We are treated this morning with two readings especially for those, at this time, who feel their backs are against the wall. Isaiah's jubilant words capture our attention and stir our imaginations as he foretells that the one who is to come will be:

“a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.”

and there will be celebration

“as with the bridegroom and his bride
as with nature's growth and transformation.”

The Gospel Reading tells us once more of the angels' wonderful message of good news - and we all need a lot more of that - and the shepherds' visit to the manger and their return, glorifying and praising God.

But why shepherds, such ordinary folk? Why were such smelly farm workers given the privilege of being the first witnesses, after Mary and Joseph of course, to see the infant Jesus? In the first century, and probably for many centuries after, shepherds did not enjoy a good reputation. Their semi nomadic lifestyle meant that they were regarded by many, at that time, as disreputable, untrustworthy, outsiders, certainly outside tight knit communities like Bethlehem. But Jesus was to make himself known to outsiders and many such people became his ardent disciples. Luke, in his Gospel, highlights the story of disciples of Jesus who were regarded as outsiders and sinners by Jewish society and its religious leaders.

The shepherds also contrast vividly with the other visitors from the East - the wise men with grand gifts, rich clothing, wisdom of the stars and perhaps servants compared to the local yokels with torn working clothes, simple gifts, if any in fact, and ignorant with little knowledge, except of sheep. Does this stark comparison signify that Christ comes to the whole world in its diversity, to everyone wherever and wherever you are? If so, where were the women visitors. Or perhaps one of the shepherds was a woman. Certainly there are female shepherds in the Holy Land today - could there have been any 2000 years ago?

Perhaps it's time to discard those stereotypes, those caricatures of shepherds being rough, smelly yokels - simple, ordinary, anonymous people. Not only does God dance in the ordinary making it extraordinary but good shepherds today and, no doubt then,

are held in high esteem. Consider, for example, Gabriel Oak in Thomas Hardy's "Far from the Madding Crowd". Here is a skilful, hardworking, resilient and honest shepherd who acts wisely when the Autumn storm arrives or when the sheep suffer from bloat. Hardy gave careful consideration to his name for he was like an oak firmly planted and rooted, strong and faithful. Shepherds have handed down experience, learning not discovered in books and close connections to the land, loyalty to a place which is their working environment. The shepherds were not random guests but carefully chosen for the qualities they distinctively and instinctively possess. One of the strongest images of Christ is of the Good Shepherd, who cares for his flock, every single one. Magdalen Smith in her book "Unearthly Beauty: through Advent with the Saints" sees the shepherds as Christmas Saints "continuously dealing with the essential and important things of human existence- life, death, love and loyalty" and as "having a natural sense of the transcendent." Shepherds have much to say to the world and those shepherds who first heard the good news of our Lord's birth prove excellent role models for us all. Having heard the angels' song, they searched and found Jesus, they shared their good news and they praised and glorified God. We are asked to do the same.

So at this very difficult Christmas we can celebrate once more Jesus' birth, realising we are dancing in the light of Christ who transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary, bringing hope and joy into our troubled world. Like the shepherds we are his Saints. His story is for all, especially for the outsider, for the ordinary. Barbara Brown Taylor in her book 'Mixed Blessings: Being the People of God' emphasises my message this morning:

"every ordinary, created thing has become transparent with his glory. There is gold in the straw and myrrh in the dung on the floor. Let us revel in the light of that star beneath which the ordinary becomes holy and the holy ordinary, beneath which it becomes exceedingly clear that there is nothing more we must do or be to be loved by God."