

## SERMON

### *The Archbishop of Canterbury*

May I speak in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. How it got here, I have no idea, but perhaps carried in Roman times, we found the report of the Bethlehem Police, for the night of the 25th of December in the year zero. And it makes for interesting reading. Like Julius Caesar in the Gallic Wars, and Julius Caesar in Asterix, it is written in the third person.

For the borough commander of Bethlehem, the census ordered by the Emperor, was a nightmare. For the Roman's special branch overseeing Palestine, a bad area, at the best of times in those days, it was the perfect storm. The census meant that everyone had to go to their home city. Bethlehem was the home city for the descendants of David, King a thousand years before. So by definition, everyone coming to Bethlehem to register for the census was a descendant of David. In other words, a potential rebel leader, in an insecure province full of terrorists. The borough commander had loads of new trouble from elsewhere, and in the crowd, could not keep tabs on the bad guys known about already. The commander and his colleagues just wanted a quiet night. Because if things got onto the radar of the local puppet ruler, Herod, anything could happen. And he was a murderous tyrant, with more enemies than you could shake a stick at, including the relatives of those members of his family that he had killed. So the first rule, well for keeping security in Bethlehem, was no kings, no mention of kings, no mention of David. Anyone who shows up, talking about David or kings was on their way, which is complicated, if you're in the City of David. The night was off to a bad start, when a star, or comet showed up. Not so much unusual, as unheard of, and the star for a superstitious lot, on a good day, are worried. And now shepherds appear. Shepherds were the biggest nuisance, in public order terms, they lived out on the hills most of the time, they carried lots of weapons and could use them. They grazed sheep over everyone's land, and we're prone to get stroppy, if anyone argued.

They were very poor, and could not care less about their reputation. Oh, and they drank for Israel. The second rule of keeping order, was to keep the shepherds sober and on the hills, looking after their flocks by night or day, or any other time. So, there you have it, a policing problem; tension, politics, terrorists, crowds, parties, drunks and crooks, in a huge confusion, of unknown people in your small borough, it can't get worse. But like all things, and the borough commander knew better than anyone, when it can't get worse, it always does. The shepherds showed up, and they were clearly intoxicated, except they seemed so stone-cold sober, but apparently beside themselves, far from waving weapons, they would just waving their arms, going on about angels and asking about newborn babies.

Eventually some clever officer in the force says, he's heard that a peasant girl had just given birth to a baby in a sort of cave, behind the inn, at the bottom of the hill. So, the shepherds get sent off there, and everyone checks their armour and weapons. A few minutes breather, and in walks this foreign character, lousy accent, just enough Greek to get by, he is the servant of some so-called Wise Men from the East.

And they followed that wretched star, that's upsetting everyone in order to find a king, a king! And they claim Herod's backing. They get taken quietly outside, so no one can hear, and then they get sent to the same inn. At least the commander can keep an eye on all the trouble in the same place. A squad gets sent down to isolate the area. Everyone is on edge until the sergeant comes back. "So quiet," he says, "They've gone inside, and they seem to be praying." The last straw. Now, we have a potential religious riot on the patch, king's rumoured to be born, Herod will have his guts for that one. Shepherds, the local authorities will be all over him, and the paperwork. So, the poor borough commander got ready to go down, to see this "King."

He buckled on his armour, sharpened his sword, prayed briefly in somewhat bad-temperedly to whatever God he believed in, or not, and went down to find a peasant woman, a carpenter and a baby. Like most people in Bethlehem that night, he put the music in the air down to imagination, the shepherds, to too many nights in the fields, the Wise Men to foreigners, who were unpredictable anyway, and went away. Because it all looked so normal that what it meant, was overlooked by almost everyone. It still is. Yet, it was the moment in which God broke into our world, in a completely different way, and nearly everyone, including our mythical borough commander, missed the fact. The coming of God as human, as much a fact of history as, us being in this building today, was not in palaces with decent warning, it was in poverty, surrounded by disease, worse, than the most of us have suffered, worse disease than even we've suffered this year of COVID.

The coming of God was in weakness and vulnerability, so many of us know about that, so many who we miss and weep for, know about that. Indeed, more than that, like all babies, God came in complete helplessness. So helpless that a few months later, the only way to avoid Herod's secret police, was to flee to Egypt as a refugee. Why would God do that, be like that? Why didn't he turn up in all his glory? It's sort of easier! Well, let's be clear, it wasn't for fun. We all know perhaps, some from experience, but anyone from observation, what rough sleeping is like, what suffering looks like, and this year we know what sorrow feels like. God does it all from love, that's a word we can get our hands on. He takes up by love, as little space as possible, the space a baby needs, leaving us all the choice in the world, to ignore him if we want to. This baby, fully human, is also fully God, we can ignore him or make space for him, and when we do that, like the shepherds, we find this baby fills our lives to past overflowing with the love of God.

We find a presence invading our lives that is made of love. We may be in a hospital ward, we may be missing someone in a hospital ward, missing someone who seems to have gone. We may be frightened and anxious, isolated, lonely. God will fill our lives with love. He offers that and gives us choice, He knows what we suffer because he did too, he knows us better than we know ourselves. Every fault and failing, every joy, and virtue. So do we walk by, like the busy little town of Bethlehem, far from still, in a war-torn land, or do we stop? And with a simple prayer make space in our hearts and lives, in the words of the old carol, "Come into my heart, Lord Jesus, there is room in my heart for you." Then we find not just the baby, but the man and the God, the cross and the resurrection, love surpassing expectation, utterly in control, with the promise of his presence, the comfort of his hope, the call of his purpose to make sense of any and every life on this earth. Better sense, than we could ever imagine. May this Christ Child, give you a truly hope-filled Christmas.

Amen.