

SERMON

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May I speak in the name of God who creates, redeems and sustains. Amen.

I've lived in this country for 40 years now. I arrived at the age of 14 from Iran where I was born and grew up as part of the tiny Anglican community there. Iran being an Islamic country, Christmas was always a special and really quite intense time for us Christians. There was no evidence of Christmas in the shops or wider society. And as children, we had to have special permission to be off school just for that one day. So we packed a lot into it from 6:00 a.m. when we woke for presents, through to late at night, there were church services, social events and all kinds of festivities. This year, I've been reminded very specially of my last Christmas in Iran in 1979. The Islamic revolution was sweeping through the country and the small church community was being battered and bruised, struggling beneath a wave of persecution. We felt vulnerable, exposed and uncertain about the future.

So celebrations were low key and there was a sense of impending danger. We know how we're supposed to feel at Christmas, or at least we think we do. Everything around us, in Western culture, the adverts, the music, the decorations and the lights feed into the idea that Christmas is about feeling warm and cosy, secure in the company of our nearest and dearest without a care in the world. The truth is of course, that it often isn't like this. And though in the past, we may have chosen to ignore the truth, this year, it's staring us in the face. As the COVID pandemic continues, we can't ignore the pain and the loss and the suffering that it's caused. Families and friends have been separated; church services have been more muted. Some have lost loved ones, others are struggling with ongoing ill health.

Many are facing financial worries and the impact of the pandemic has laid bare the reality of underlying inequalities in our society. Inequalities that shame us, crying out for justice and demanding our attention. Many, many people this Christmas haven't felt warm and cosy. Tears, sadness and grief have been accompanying emotions. And it's important that we recognise that. But I'm here now to remind us that whatever our feelings and emotions and whatever our circumstances, the message of Christmas still holds true. Just as it did for the church community in Iran all those years ago. So it is still for every one of us today. The essence of Christmas has nothing to do with how we feel, who we're with or what's going on in our lives. For the Christ child whose birth we celebrate came not into the warmth, comfort and security of a wealthy household or an imperial palace. He was born instead into a dirty, smelly stable surrounded by animals and his parents far from home, probably frightened and anxious about the future.

Jesus Christ enters into the messiness of our lives, not with a promise to make everything all right and solve all our problems, but with a promise to be alongside us in the ups and downs of life, offering hope for the future and deep peace in the present. In today's gospel reading, we encounter the shepherds just after they've received news of Christ's birth from the angels, and as they make their way to Bethlehem to find the newborn King. And I'd like to share with you just two observations about the part the shepherds play in the Christmas story.

The first is that the shepherds were the very first people to hear the news of Christ's birth. And that tells us something really quite significant about God's relationship with humanity. The news might have been proclaimed to kings and queens to governors and to the rulers of the nations. But instead, the angels visited a group of lowly shepherds who in first century Palestine were considered amongst the lowest of the low.

They represent those who were at the bottom of the social ladder. Think today, maybe of migrant workers, of those who are homeless, of those who have no rights and very little status in society. It is to these that the Good News is first proclaimed. And that serves as a reminder that in the kingdom of God, the poorest and the most vulnerable are prioritised, treated with respect and honour, entrusted with the news of Christ's birth. And that's why I'm so proud to be associated with the work of the Church Army, an organisation with a long and noble tradition not only of unashamedly sharing the Christian message but also of commitment to work with and alongside some of those who are most marginalised in our society today. The example of the Church Army challenges us for it reflects something of God's economy in which the values of the world are turned upside down. And my second observation about the shepherds is that having heard the news of Christ's birth they had to make a choice. They might simply have returned to their work and got on with the rest of their lives albeit with a good story to tell their children and grandchildren about their encounter with the angels. But they chose instead to leave their sheep and to travel to Bethlehem, to find the Christ child. And so began their adventure of faith. The gift of faith is an offer to all but none will be coerced. We have to choose to journey towards Christ to meet him and experience the peace that he offers and allow him to change our hearts, our minds and our lives. Faith is a free gift, but it's also an act of will. If we choose to say 'yes', it draws us into the heart of a worshipping community and it begins a journey of discovery into a relationship with Christ that will take us a whole lifetime to unfold and to fully understand. It can be costly but the rewards are rich and the promise is constant. With the much-loved carol, Silent Night, which retells the events of Jesus's birth in poetry and music, It's often struck me though that the stable was probably far from silent that night.

There was the noise of the animals of Joseph calling out for help, perhaps, as Mary cried out with labour pains. But maybe the carol speaks of a different kind of silence, of God who appeared in flesh in a quiet unassuming manner in the form of a tiny baby without any noise in the political or imperial scene. To all intents and purposes, this was just another unexceptional birth of a child born to poor parents far from home. And yet this inconspicuous event that went unnoticed by most became a pivotal moment in the history of the world. Everything changed when God came to dwell among us and to share in the reality of our lived experiences and invite us to a different way of being. The truth at the heart of the Christmas story still goes unnoticed by many today, silently passed over amidst the clamour and noise of Christmas celebrations. But God is ever present, silently and patiently waiting, longing for us to respond once more to the gentle call of the Christ Child.

Amen.