

Christmas Day Sermon, 25th December 2014
St. Andrew's, Totteridge -10:00 a.m.

Christmas – just another mid-Winter Festival?

When the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury preach their Christmas sermons, they know that they are speaking, not just to their congregations, but to the world. Their messages, already released to the media, are 'news'. And so, understandably, they feel the need to address the big issues of the day, which no doubt this year include the ongoing terrible conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Iraq, the rise of a particularly nasty form of Islamic fundamentalism, and of course the ongoing awfulness of the Ebola virus in West Africa.

But I am merely a Church of England Priest in North London, and today, one of the holiest of days, you are my prime concern. So I'm not going to talk about the big issues for their own sake. Of course, the big issues are our issues too - they matter immensely. But this morning I want to focus on your hopes and dreams, your fears and anxieties, your disappointments over this past year, and your successes.

Which is why I was very taken by a reading I recently came across. It's by Arnold Kellett, a Yorkshire poet and historian, who died earlier in 2009. It's one of many Christmas poems he wrote in his long life, and goes like this:

*If Jesus had never been born,
There'd still be a Christmas by some other name:*

*We'd brighten mid-winter, and feast, just the same,
With corpulent turkey, and puddings and pies
And all the brave glitter that art can devise;
With satisfied stomach and contented mind
We'd purr with the pleasures of pagan mankind;
With greetings and gifts round the evergreen tree,
Like the jolly old Romans did, ages BC.
But we'd have no bright carols, no pealing of bells,
No tidings that Christ now in Bethlehem dwells,
No babe in the manger, no ox in the stall,
No angels, no shepherds, no good will to all;
No Mary, no Joseph, no Wise Men who came
To worship a King of unparalleled fame;
No Gospel to cheer us, no news to refresh,
No glad proclamation of God become flesh.
Then let us keep Christmas, the birth of the Boy
Who floodlights our darkness with infinite joy,
For God is now with us, to seek and to save,
To die for our sins and to rise from the grave,
To help us, to heal us, to bring us to bliss...
Yet, poorer than pagans, if, blind to all this,
We grope through our winter, depressed and forlorn ..
Just as if Jesus had never been born.*

You see, what we are celebrating here today is precisely not a mid-winter festival, or 'winter' - or yuletide, or any other piece of 'P.C.' escapism from the darkness of winter and the darkness of the world. Kellett is right: if Jesus had never been born, we would undoubtedly have a secular feast at this time of the year just to cheer ourselves up. (The Scots, have one. It's called Hogmanay!).

But Jesus was born, and so we celebrate today because of the simple conviction, firm and strong, that in Jesus of Nazareth God entered decisively into a dark and fallen world, a world of fear and depression, of tyranny and war. And if he came into it then, he can come into it today, to save the world and give it peace. And that is our hope.

All that needs to happen - but it is all - is that you allow Jesus to be born in yourself and to live and grow and rule in you. The stable stands for no more and no less than the human heart, your heart and mine, and it is into our hearts that the Christ-child longs to be born today - and will be, if we will only allow it.

All too soon the Christmas decorations will come down. The crib will be dismantled. The Holy Family, the Shepherds and the Wise Men will go back in the cupboard for another year. But that child will not go away, and nor will his message. You can turn your back on him if you wish, and stop your ears so as not to hear his voice. But he will still be there, at the door of your heart, pleading for entrance. He wants you for his own. And he has work for you to do.

Work that another poet Howard Thurman puts very well and whose words I'll leave you with now,

*When the song of the angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone
When the kings and princes are home
When the shepherds are back with their flocks*

*The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among the people
To make music in the heart*

Have a wonderful Christmas – and keep the spirit of Christ always in your heart by resolving to do one work of love and peace for Him, today and every day of your life. Amen.

I am indebted to the poet Arthur Kellett & the Revd Canon Eric Woods for the inspiration behind this sermon.

Luke 2.1-20

The Birth of Jesus

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In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
¹⁴'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Titus 2.11-14

¹¹For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, ¹²training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, ¹³while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ. ¹⁴He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Psalm 96 Praise to God Who Comes in Judgement

¹ O sing to the Lord a new song;
sing to the Lord, all the earth.
² Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
tell of his salvation from day to day.
³ Declare his glory among the nations,
his marvellous works among all the peoples.
⁴ For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.
⁵ For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the Lord made the heavens.
⁶ Honour and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

⁷ Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
⁸ Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
bring an offering, and come into his courts.
⁹ Worship the Lord in holy splendour;
tremble before him, all the earth.

¹⁰ Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king!
The world is firmly established; it shall never be
moved.
He will judge the peoples with equity.'
¹¹ Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
¹² let the field exult, and everything in it.
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
¹³ before the Lord; for he is coming,

for he is coming to judge the earth.
He will judge the world with righteousness,
and the peoples with his truth.

Isaiah 9.2-7

² The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.
³ You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.
⁴ For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.
⁵ For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.
⁶ For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷ His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onwards and for evermore.

The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

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