**Christmas Eve Sermon 2021** by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Christmas Eve 2021 at St Michael’s Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Luke 2:1-20, John 1:1-14

**Christmas – love it or hate it?**

So here we are at last: Christmas has arrived! Shopping has been done, cards written, presents wrapped. Maybe you’re someone who is super-organised, or maybe, like me, you’re still trying to pull things together at the last minute.

I wonder, *what do you love most about Christmas?* And I also wonder, *what do you hate most about Christmas?* Which of these two hats would you prefer to wear – this one [the red one], reminding us of that cheery fat man who drives a sleigh across the skies - or this one [the black one] which bears the words “Bah, Humbug!” across it?

There are certainly things I love *and* things I hate about Christmas. If you’re here this evening, or joining us online, I can assume that this service is one of the things you love about Christmas. Of course, there are lots of lovely things we associate with Christmas. Last week I attended the Nativity play of the Little Sandhurst Nursery, and there is hardly anything sweeter than a bunch of little kids dressed up as angels, shepherds, Mary and Joseph.

**The Christmas Story**

For me, what I love best about Christmas is the Christmas story itself, but not the version you see on Christmas cards, with the nice warm, cosy stable, and the angels singing overhead. Actually, can you think of a more *un*suitable place to give birth? It’s a bit like some of the early episodes of *Call the Midwife*, where the midwives go out to deliver babies in all kinds of unsanitary conditions. I can imagine Trixie, the nice blond middle-class midwife, attending to Mary, and saying, “You’re doing so well, sweetie, one more push and baby will be here”, while in the background a cow empties its bladder into the hay. Poor Mary, a first-time mum, is miles from home, with no mother to comfort and reassure her, while Joseph, who can work wonders with a hammer and a saw, is standing there feeling helpless and just hoping it’s all going to go OK.

Mary and Joseph didn’t hear any angels singing glory to God overhead. The Christmas carol says “How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given”, but I doubt very much that Mary was silent as she laboured to bring Jesus into the world. At least she couldn’t curse Joseph for getting her into this condition!

**The world as it is**

This is a story of ordinary people making the best of a difficult situation – a bit like what we’ve all been doing over the last 2 years with this Covid pandemic. Mary and Joseph are in Bethlehem because of a decree by the occupying Roman Government. Would you like to travel over 60 miles on a donkey while 9 months pregnant? There’s no comfy hotel room, no nursery, cot or Moses basket, just a feeding trough for the baby to lie in. Nothing has gone according to plan – at least not *their* plan.

But the amazing thing about this story is that it was going exactly according to *God’s* plan. God, the Creator of the universe, sends his Son into a world that is full of injustice, poverty, confusion and struggle, to show us that he cares for us. He cares that much that he is prepared to be part of the mess of our lives, in order that he can bring comfort and hope. Jesus becomes a human being so that we can see how God can transform even the worst situations and bring meaning and life. The world of 2,000 years ago didn’t have cars, planes, global warming or social media, but the basic causes of the problems we face as a human race have not changed. Greed, selfishness and indifference are at the root of most of the troubles in the world. If the world is to be changed, then *we* have to be changed.

The manger that the baby Jesus was laid in had been made by a carpenter just like Joseph. Years later, another carpenter would fashion a large rough cross to hang a criminal on, and Jesus, the village carpenter from Nazareth, would be nailed to it, to suffer and die to take upon himself all the hatred, the injustice and the brokenness of our world. And in doing this, he would break the power of sin and set people free – free to become the people we were created to be, the children of God our Father.

**Children of God?**

This is “the mystery of the Incarnation” which St John was writing about in our last reading this evening. Incarnation means “becoming flesh” – God becoming human in the man Jesus. The words we heard are simple, but so deep with meaning.

10He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. 11He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. 12But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. (John 1:10-12, ESV)

When John writes “children of God” he doesn’t just mean we are God’s children because God created us. What he means is that we can become people who have a personal relationship with God as our heavenly Father. God is wanting this kind of relationship with each of us.

But we all have a choice. John writes that “the world did not know him”, and “his own people did not receive him”. We can choose to go out of this church, back to our ordinary lives, as if the Christmas story were just another children’s story. Then we will miss out on the whole reason God’s Son was born into our world 2,000 years ago.

Or we can take the other alternative – to receive Jesus as our Saviour and believe and trust in him. Then we can come to know God, not as some distant being who may or may not exist, but as our heavenly Father.

**What about us?**

Tonight, we’re in the same position as the shepherds: we have heard the good news of the Saviour’s birth, not through a choir of angels but through the readings from the bible and the carols that have been sung.

The shepherds decided to go and see for themselves. What about you? Have you already found Jesus for yourself? If so, will you be like the shepherds and share the news with others?

If not, will you decide this evening to seek him out?

It can start with a simple prayer – just talk to God about your hopes, your doubts, your intention to know him. If you’d like us to help you, please fill out a Welcome card which you’ll find in the pews, and hand it to Rev John White or one of the welcome team, or pop it in the black metal box, and we’ll get back to you.

The Christmas story is not a fairy story. It’s good news about a loving God coming to seek us out in our lives as they really are, and about how we choose to respond to him.

What does Christmas mean to you – humbug or hope?

May the good news of Christ’s birth bring you and those you love peace, joy and hope this Christmas. Amen.