

The Christmas story

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Christmas Eve 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst (Carol Service)

Readings: Genesis 3:8-15; Isaiah 11:1-9; Luke 1:26-38; Luke 2:1-20; Matthew 2:1-12

Introduction

Let me first say how delightful it is to see you all here this evening for our second service of Christmas Eve. This afternoon we had a very different service, although the theme was the same. It was the Nativity service, where children were invited to dress up to take part in the story of the birth of Jesus. How many of you have been to a nativity play this year? How many of you have been *in* a nativity play (probably as a child)? What were you? And what did you learn about the meaning of the story from playing a part in it? One of my favourite Christmas anecdotes is about the young daughter of some friends of ours who was heard saying, as she walked up the aisle in church one nativity service, "I didn't want to be a poxy angel anyway". If you were a small child, what part would you like to play if you had the chance?

Of course, at Christmas there are so many things to go and see. Maybe some of you have been to a pantomime, or are going after Christmas. Or perhaps you prefer the cinema. I wonder who has seen any of the current **films** on offer?

Cats - want to see Taylor Swift prancing around in a cat costume?

Jumanji - the next level - Not knowing much about video games I think I'd be lost here.

Frozen 2 - great if you've got daughters under the age of 9

Blue Story - the tragic tale of friendship between 2 boys of different London gangs

Maybe if you'd like a Romcom and have watched *Love Actually* too many times already, *Last Christmas* could be the one for you.

Or for a bit of intergalactic escapism, why not blast off for *Star Wars - the Rise of Skywalker*?

The most popular story

Here at St Michael's we don't show any films but we do have a story to tell that seems to draw the crowds year after year - the story of the first Christmas. In fact, it's been one of the most popular stories, if not *the* most popular story in the world for the past 2000 years. Why is that?

You might think that it's because we all love Nativity plays – proud mums, dads and grandparents watching little children dress up as shepherds, angels, innkeepers, wise men and maybe even Mary and Joseph! Of course, it is a great story for children who love donkeys, lambs and angels and the chance to dress up.

But what is the story about when you look at it from an *adult* perspective? There's obviously something of the fantasy element about it – supernatural beings and a miraculous birth (an idea which was copied in Star Wars Episode 1). Ordinary, unsuspecting shepherds are startled when a portal opens between the material universe and the spiritual one to reveal angelic beings celebrating the birth of the Supreme Being's son to a human family (somewhat reminiscent of *Superman*). There's something exotic about stargazers from a distant country travelling hundreds of miles in response to a sign in the heavens.

Harsh realities

But for all the awesomeness of the supernatural in the story, when you zoom in on the principal characters it's not quite so cute and cuddly as a school nativity play would suggest.

The circumstances of Mary's pregnancy before her marriage to Joseph must have put both of them under pressure in a village like Nazareth where traditional values were honoured.

The demands of the occupying Roman Empire force Joseph to take a heavily pregnant Mary on a 90-mile journey to Bethlehem, where they find there is no accommodation available and she is forced to give birth in a stable (it sounds a bit like some of the scenes in *Call the Midwife!*).

There's a glorious moment when they are visited by some strange sages from the East bearing exotic gifts, but within a few hours of this they have to flee the country to escape a massacre of babies and toddlers ordered by King Herod, a ruthless dictator who, according to historical sources, was paranoid enough to kill members of his own family who made him feel threatened.

If you think about it, the story of the birth of Jesus has all the **themes** of great cinema but also connects with the realities of today's world – political power-play, violence, romance, and above all the experience of ordinary people facing extraordinary situations, some of which give a window onto profound cosmic events and some of which threaten their very lives. Mary and Joseph have to learn quickly to find resources within themselves and in God so that they can face the challenges that are thrown at them - misunderstanding and ostracism, homelessness, the threat of violence and above all the enormous responsibility of their calling to be the parents of the Son of God.

So perhaps it is not surprising that the story continues to appeal after 20 centuries of telling.

The message of the nativity story

But I think the real key is the message of the story. It's a story about real, ordinary people, but its message is extraordinary and almost too amazing to believe: the Creator of the universe cares so much about his crazy, messed-up world and its crazy, messed-up people that he chooses to make himself known to us, become part of our story and transform it from the inside, bringing healing, inspiration and hope. As St John puts it in his gospel, *God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him should not perish but have eternal life* (John 3:16).

Each Christmas, and at many other times in the year, we have the opportunity to pay attention to this message and explore what it might mean for our own lives. Tonight is one such moment. The story of the shepherds speaks of a portal being opened between the spiritual world and the material world. That portal is still open, and we are invited to pass through it and discover the reality of God for ourselves. The story of the wise men speaks of a star put in the heavens by God to guide them to where the Son of God could be found. Many people I know, some of whom are in this congregation tonight, have followed the signs that God placed in their lives and have found the Saviour for themselves.

Unlike the stories of the films I mentioned earlier, this story has a message that speaks to people of every background and in every situation of life. It contains the clues to how we can find true meaning and purpose in our lives, how we can be part of a cosmic plan for the restoration and transformation of the world.

Our choice

We have a choice: either we can go home this evening having enjoyed a lovely carol service and settle back into the routine of our lives as if nothing had happened; or we can follow the example of the shepherds and the wise men, and seek out the Saviour until we find him, and fall down on our knees in worship. Unlike the shepherds and the wise men, we today have many resources to help us discover God for ourselves.

This Church is a community of people who have found, or are seeking to know God for themselves. If you would like to join us on that journey, and would like someone to let you know

how we can help you, please fill in one of the Welcome cards in the pews and give it to myself or place it in the black metal box near the door.

Whoever you are, and wherever you are on your journey of exploration, may you have a very peaceful and happy Christmas.

So in our prayers now, and as we sing the final carol of this service, let me issue this invitation:
Come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord! Amen.