

# Monday 24 December 2007: Christmas Eve Midnight Mass

## Love in small particulars

### Readings: Isaiah 9.2-7; John 1.1-14

There was a marvellous moment at the end of yesterday's Eucharist for the Fourth Sunday in Advent. Our Children's Club did their annual "pick up" Nativity. Each of the characters carried signs that showed who they were and one aspect of the story – the sign of an Inn, a manger, a little lamb, the crown of a king... and they laid them at the feet of the Advent ring, its four candles lit expectantly around the one remaining central candle. Then we sang that grand Charles Wesley hymn, "Lo he comes with clouds descending" with its final verse:

*Yea, Amen, let all adore thee,  
High on thine eternal throne;  
Saviour, take the power and glory:  
Claim the kingdom for thine own".*

Here was the big picture, the grand narrative, sung at the same time as our being shown the small particularities of God's love.

A few weeks ago was the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of one of London's greatest visionaries, William Blake. Blake saw the connection between the particular and the infinite:

*To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour.*

In the baby of Bethlehem, love came among us: "*We have seen his glory, the glory of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth*".

And does it matter? In the sober light of day, when we have returned to our homes to get on with our lives, does this story make any difference to us personally and to our shared public life?

Well of course it does, it evokes kindness, challenges, complacency, and creatively subverts the powers of this world. This story has a cutting edge.

### Evoking Kindness

The journey of a young couple about to give birth to a busy town, and despite Joseph being "of David's line" having no family to land on, when they had not called ahead to make a reservation, the Inn keeper took them in to the back shed. The community gathered round. It's a tale that can be retold about refugees and asylum seekers and at St Martin's about homeless people.

The annual St Martin's BBC Radio 4 Christmas Appeal is one of the miracles of life here. It is organised by one paid member of staff and nearly 100 volunteers who answer the phones and open the post. It is too early to know the total this year, but it is certainly over £500,000 and will continue to grow in the New Year. The kindness of thousands of people make possible the care of

thousands of other people who have fallen through all the other safety nets and find themselves in central London and with nowhere to go, or facing a crisis they can't resolve on their own. This morning a priest in very rural St David's e-mailed to say he had taken a gift from the Christmas Appeal Fund to a mother and four children who are really struggling. It moved her to tears and stunned the eldest child that anyone cared.

What came through so strongly in this year's Appeal was that the people needing help are not so different to the people who can help. Brian, a pensioner in Leicestershire, told how he got into debt when his wife died and he had to move the next day to the bigger flat they had been looking forward to but which on his own he could not afford. He lost heart, got depressed, let the arrears build up and thought about throwing himself into the canal. What mattered about our gift to help him get on top of his arrears was simply that someone cared. After the Appeal was broadcast, he sent a 'Thank you' card with £10 to start this year's Appeal.

That sort of kindness, repeated thousands of times, is the salt of the earth and the light that darkness will never overcome.

### **Challenging Complacency**

We're all fed up with the consumerist Christmas and Glory to God in the High Street. That the health of the economy seems to depend on a mid-Winter binge is frankly disgusting. From 1644-60, in this country the Puritans banned Christmas because,

*More mischief is that time committed than in all the year besides ... What dicing and carding, what eating and drinking, what banqueting and feasting is then used ... to the great dishonour of God and the impoverishing of the realm.*

They said Christmas isn't Biblical, which would get our Archbishop of Canterbury into terrible trouble if he said that now. Of course the ban on Christmas didn't work. Christmas is too good a popular celebration and great fun. Puritans never get the popular vote! The task is to do something creative with it so that the power of the story challenges our complacency.

The lighting of the Oslo Christmas tree in Trafalgar Square is an annual reminder that Scandinavians understand darkness and light, and perhaps the experience of giving the Nobel Peace Prize gives the city of Oslo a depth of understanding and realism about peace making in our world.

### **Creatively subverting the powers of this world**

Several of our Christmas posters and service sheets have pictures of Bethlehem: Manger Square, a gun tower next to a church. These images bring us up short when singing, "O little town of Bethlehem how still we see thee lie".

The graffiti artist Banksey has done some fabulous paintings on the so called 'Security Wall' and in the Palestinian towns. Its easy to find the set on the web, including one done two years ago, as though a hole had been broken through the wall with blue sky beyond and a person standing on the rubble looking through. This year's include the side of a house with bullet holes in the plaster, on which has been painted a dove of peace carrying an olive branch but wearing a bullet proof vest and with a marksman's target marked on it. My favourites are an Israeli soldier, hands on the wall and gun on the floor, being frisked by a small girl. And of a soldier checking the ID card of a donkey wanting to go to Bethlehem.

These highly political uses of the Nativity story can be irritating and risk trivialising the story, but they are also wonderfully subversive and sometimes land the message creatively in a way that is uncomfortably close to home, like the Liverpool Nativity, or the London Citizens on either side of the crack in the floor of the Tate Modern singing Christmas Carols about the gap between our City's rich and poor and the poverty of London's lowest paid workers, including the gallery's cleaners.

The story of God come among us evokes kindness and challenges complacency. It is intended to unsettle us, wake us up and give us a vision of love in minute particulars changing and transforming the world that God's Kingdom may come as it is in heaven.

*"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of a Father's only son, full of grace and truth."*