

## SERMON PREACHED AT SJH MIDNIGHT MASS 24 DECEMBER 2017

### SET I READINGS

Happy Christmas everybody! Well done for coming to church and putting a bit of religion into this midwinter festival. I hope your celebrations will be joyful and not too excessive – and none of us should forget those who cannot join in the festive feeling, for whatever reason.

There is a sense of warmth in the Nativity story: a baby, angels, shepherds adoring, orientals bringing exotic gifts and so on. There is ample material for nativity services in school and church. Mary and Gabriel are the plum parts. We have a crib at the back of church, with clean straw and electric lighting. The reality was different, though the gospel accounts are very sparse in detail. Christian artists and playwrights have used their imagination, but we should remember that a succession of unfriendly innkeepers is dramatic licence.

The sense of warmth continues as we think more deeply about the birth of Jesus, though we become aware of a chill wind. The angel tells the shepherds, “...to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour...”. The name ‘Jesus’ means ‘Saviour’. Humanity needed salvation, needed to be saved. It still does. We often talk in church about being saved from sin. What is sin? It includes the wrong things we do, but it’s bigger than that. It describes the whole human condition. There is good in the world and there is evil. We live as members of society, and try as we might, we cannot escape from sharing in its failings: the economic injustices, the exploitation of the environment, the oppression of the weak. The angel’s declaration of peace has not been embraced by mankind. Sometimes, of course, we will be on the receiving end of evil. The promise of a saviour in the gospels has a wide perspective. The angel describes the saviour as ‘the Messiah, the Lord,’ – titles which describe his rôle for a whole people, not just individuals. At the end of the Christmas season we shall observe Jesus being presented in the temple where Simeon acclaims the salvation he brings to all nations: a light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of Israel.

The chill wind I speak of is our need to be realistic: to admit our need of salvation. It is offered to us in the Christ child; it is up to us to respond. We welcome the birth of the saviour of the world; how can we go on as if nothing has happened? It would be like getting a Christmas present but not unwrapping it, not letting it change our lives. As S. John writes at the beginning of the gospel named after him, ‘...to all who received him (that is Christ, the true light), he gave power to become children of God.’ There is a beautiful symmetry in the Christmas message: the Son of God became human so that humans might become God’s children.

What does this mean in practice? First, at a personal level, we can know forgiveness from sin. Each of us is valued by God, who is not remote or uncaring, but whose Word became flesh. We must respond to the gospel message of repentance – of a daily turning from sin and turning to Christ. ‘Be born in us today,’ we sing in a well known carol. Second, we will naturally want to join, or continue within, the community of God’s children on earth. The shorthand for this is the church, and we shouldn’t define this too narrowly. This community is linked to the historical Israel, was focussed through Mary in the baby born at Bethlehem, and ever since then has spread through the human race. It is not perfect in this world, but within it we grow, serve and worship Christ, who is the head of the body. And thirdly, we should work to good effect within human society, the world in which we live. We should not withdraw for comfort or through fear of contamination. This is the world created by God and graced by him in human flesh. He ate and drank among us sinners, and he has redeemed us to be his presence on earth today.