

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH CHRISTMAS DAY 2018

SET II READINGS

There are three journeys in the Christmas Story.

Mary and Joseph: a journey of NEED. Not 'need' in the sense of being without something, but in the sense that they needed to make the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. They had to go. The Romans who were in charge of Israel at that time were doing a population count and required Joseph to register at Bethlehem because his family came from there. King David was one of Joseph's ancestors, and he was from Bethlehem.

It wouldn't have been an easy journey. It was about 100 miles. It would have taken several days, and Mary would soon be giving birth. A little while after Jesus was born they had another journey forced on them: fleeing to Egypt to escape king Herod who wanted to kill Jesus. We can think of times in our lives when we've been forced to do things which are difficult, which we could do without. It can be a strength for us to remember that the holy family, and Jesus himself, have gone through similar experiences.

The shepherds: a journey of JOY. They must have been surprised at the vision, first of one angel and then of many, a multitude of the heavenly host. The angel gave them a short but very full description of who the baby was. The angel used three titles for Jesus: Saviour, Messiah and Lord. 'To you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.' The Saviour delivers people from sin and death. The Messiah fulfils prophecies of one who is to come, chosen by God, to bring in a kingdom of righteousness. The Lord is a title of God. Why did God choose to reveal all this to some shepherds? Maybe because they were poor, on the fringes of society, and often not trusted. You don't need to be special to be chosen by God. Maybe because a shepherd's duties included watching. At midnight mass and this morning we've had two different readings from the prophet Isaiah. Both of them refer to sentinels, people on the lookout, to announce to others what's happening. The shepherds went joyfully to Bethlehem, and made known what had been told them about the child.

When we've received good news we want to tell other people about it. Joy is something that is easy to share with other people. We may not be rich or powerful, or feel that we're special compared to the next person, but the truth is we're special to God. The way to make a difference to our community is to share our joy outside the church as well as inside.

The magi: a journey of HOPE. They had the longest journey. They could not have been sure where it would end geographically. I have a feeling they were surprised at what they found. They were seeking 'the king of the Jews'. They found a baby born of ordinary parents, not royalty, in the humblest accommodation, not a palace. They had to change plans, and go home by a different route.

Much is uncertain in our lives. We often find ourselves travelling in hope (using travelling as a general image for going through life), not knowing what we shall find. The Christian hope is founded on the conviction that God is in the various situations we encounter, and by his grace we may change in response to his will.

At Christmas we celebrate God reaching out in love to the human world, and entering it through the birth of his Son. He is Emmanuel, God with us, on our journeys: those we need to make, those we joyfully undertake, and those where hope sustains us. The story of nativity is our story.