

St Mary Maldon  
24<sup>th</sup> December 2020.  
11 Midnight Mass  
(Livestream)

The Christmas joke that seems to be going round this year is the one about the innkeeper who says, "I am sorry we have no zoom at the inn."

And that sums up 2020.

This time last year I hadn't heard of Zoom.

But like many people I meet people on Zoom two or three times a week.

And the sad thing is that tomorrow many people will only see their friends and relatives by Zoom or one of the alternatives.

They will miss human contact.

Many will be on their own.

Some of course stranded on a lorry park or motorway in Kent.

We have missed so many things this year, haven't we?

Some have missed traditional Christmas shopping, going round festive, highly decorated stores.

Pressing a button on Amazon is just not the same.

Another thing many of us have missed is the traditional nativity play.

The local primary school has not been to church this year.

For the first time we have not held our crib service.

These nativity plays are a memorable part of Christmas for many.

We have not seen the shepherds with the tea towels round their heads.

We have missed the wise men wrapped in curtains and wearing cardboard crowns.

We have missed those wonderful angel wings which have a habit of collapsing half way through the performance.

And the strange assortment of boxes the three kings bring their gifts in.

I remember as a child carrying a red metal Oxo tin with myrrh in it.

We miss the forgotten lines and the improvisation.

"Yes we've got room at the inn" a boy helpfully said in one production.

You may have seen the one on social media where a little girl dressed as a sheep took a fancy to the baby Jesus, and took him out of the crib.

Mary grabbed him back and a fight ensued.

Yes, this year we will miss our nativity plays.

However, as charming as they are, they actually cloak a pretty bleak story.

At the time there was a hated Roman occupation.

A census had been forced on the people.

A heavily pregnant woman had been forced to go on a long journey.  
She was forced to give birth in an animal shed.  
Mary and Joseph were refugees.  
They were homeless.  
They were poor.  
Their only companions were rough folk, the shepherds.  
As I said, without all the trimmings, it is a bleak story.  
So not so different from our position in 2020.  
Folk away from their families.  
Some stranded a long way from home.  
And we still have the homeless and refugees amongst us.

But we know the story at Bethlehem had a happy ending.  
A baby was born.  
And that baby became the champion of those on the margins.  
The homeless, the street sleepers, the exiles, the immigrants, the poor, the  
down and outs, the broken hearted.  
Jesus showed us that these people are loved by God.  
They are important to him.  
“Love your neighbour as yourself” he said.  
He taught us a new way of life, based on love and trust, not envy or greed.

I was clear that 2000 years ago in Palestine things had gone wrong.  
This dreadful virus is a sign that here and now things have gone wrong,  
inequality, emphasis on consumerism, suspect farming and food distribution  
practices and environmental neglect.  
It provides a lesson to us that we must put things right.  
And there are some signs we are starting to learn that lesson.  
We have seen people helping each other in the lockdowns.  
Doing shopping, collecting prescriptions, just keeping an eye out.  
We have seen the unselfish work of many in the NHS.  
Putting their own lives at risk to help others.  
We have really seen the maxim of “love your neighbour” at work.  
At the same time we have become more aware of inequalities in society.  
In the first wave we saw a disproportionate effect of the virus on the poor and  
vulnerable

So that baby born in Bethlehem 2000 years ago gives us hope.  
The birth was a sign that God cares for us.  
He emptied himself, as Paul puts it, and became one of us.

So he could identify with our suffering.

And when he became an adult he showed us a sustainable pattern of life.

A pattern based not on selfishness, envy and greed but one based on love.

Love for God and love for others.

If we read what he did and said and follow it we will get back on the right path.

That path will eventually lead us to the Kingdom of God and that is surely good news.

Good news in bleak times as it was 2000 years ago in Bethlehem.