

Christmas

Bristol Cathedral 2024

In those days

The days of empire, of emperors who could send out a decree which would require all the world, everyone (no matter their age or health or responsibilities), to go back to where they came from, their names to be added to a list, so they could be taxed.

The days of Emperor Augustus

In those days

The days of local governors carrying out orders trying to control their little worlds using inducements and threats....with crosses lining the roads a reminder of the sanctions available.

the days of Quirinius of Syria

In those days

When religious leaders in Jerusalem maintained their status and power by compromising with empire and debating the fine points of doctrine and lacking all curiosity needed to notice either the burdens laid on their people or even the signs of newness and light.

the days of Annas and Caiaphas.

And in those days Joseph and Mary saw and believed and trusted walked the road from Galilee to Judea. Mary carrying the child in her womb who would breach both social convention and all precedent, travelling beyond the safety of faithful companions and a secure home, trusting, miraculously trusting the words of the angel 'do not be afraid' . And that despite all the evidence around her. So Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem and Mary laboured to bring her son to birth and though her son God's new kingdom to birth.

And, in those days shepherds, like the Bedouin of these days in the Middle East, like pastoralists the world over whose way of living gives them eyes to see not just good forage and lurking predators, but, on this great occasion, angels. And Luke's gospel records they heard those same words 'do not be afraid'.

Pastoralists disrupt the order of empire and nation and the adjuncts of power, and are sometimes the only ones free to wonder and wander into the very beginning of God's new kingdom. It was this transgressive group who were the first to hear and then repeat the message of the angels of hope and joy and peace despite all the evidence around them.

And in our days, where is the hope or joy or peace to be found? In our days of demagoguery and polarisation, of proliferating racism and xenophobia, of grotesque imbalances of power and wealth, of fear funded scarcity rather than openhanded generosity. In our days when institutions, including the Church of England, mishandle power, and vulnerable children and adults are exploited rather than cared for. What of our own days?

Here, in the darkness of night and in this place where prayer has mattered and been valid for hundreds of years, there is the chance to see differently despite all the evidence around us, see clearly small signs of hope and peace and joy, in short, moments of holiness. I think of two such moments tonight as I remember those who refused to be afraid.

Back in the summer, after the devastating attacks on a children's dance class in Southport, and subsequent rumours that the attacker was a Moslem refugee, violence spilled onto the streets of towns and cities, with threats to Muslims and then to refugees and then to anyone with a black or brown skin.

Tensions deepened. Fear of strangers, of those different from us, of those who are themselves vulnerable and afraid. But not everywhere, as I soon heard..

From St Mary Redcliffe congregation who reached out to those refugees trapped by fear in the hotel opposite them, and welcomed them with opened arms into their community centre.

And from Easton Christian Family Centre off the Stapleton Road, where congregation and clergy walked the road listening to the stories and the deep fear of business owners as they boarded up their shops. Together Moslem and Christian found courage and found words which broke down the hostility which divided faith from faith.

And on the night that social media had predicted violence, first a trickle of people, then a gentle crowd moved into the space between the Old Market and Stapleton Road. And everyone breathed a little more easily as we saw there was peace, and hope rose, and there was just a little joy.

And then a second moment of holiness, as I sat with a friend who was dying, a human experience common to us all but so often kept out of sight and out of mind. There was no room in a hospice, so tragically underfunded, but there was good palliative care and a round of friends who came and sat and sang and prayed and accompanied our friend through the shadows to the moment of her death, believing that, knowing that, because of the birth of Christ the focus of God's care is particularly, deeply with the most vulnerable.

It was hard to decide to be in that space and at the bedside. The impulsion to evade the precariousness of death in the busyness of living is so strong. And yet staying in the presence of death was, as I experienced it on that day, a moment of profound hope.

Do not be afraid. In a moment, as the communion is shared and, as you cradle Christ's fragile body in your hands, may you hear and know the words of the angel.

Do not be afraid and as you receive the body of Christ, the beloved of God, the Christ, loved by Mary and Joseph, the baby who was good news who was laughed with and gossiped about by the shepherds.

Do not be afraid as you face both tenderness and tragedy in the years to come.

Do not be afraid. And may know that God's love and joy and peace will be with you on this Christmas day, and will be for ever.