

## Christmas and other stories

Some stories begin 'Once upon a time'; others 'Long ago and far away', but the one we hear again tonight, opens with those six words that locate us so unmistakably here at Christmas Midnight Mass: 'In the beginning was the Word'.

Tonight we hear again that evocative story of the incarnation according to St John. Famously, John doesn't speak directly of the birth in the stable, but tells the story from a much more mystical and overarching perspective, looking backwards and forwards in time, connecting the act of Creation with the Incarnation, the Word being made flesh to dwell among us.

Inevitably, Christmas is a time for taking stock, for slowing down and seeking that wider perspective – remembering and reflecting upon where and how we are now compared with Christmases past. It's a more painful process for some than others, particularly those facing the first Christmas without a loved one who has died, or since an unfortunate and unwelcome change in circumstances. Christmas is a time when such losses are felt most keenly, and the comfort that memories of happier times may bring is tempered by the heightened sense of absence.

This Christmas I find myself aware of two particular absences, as I remember last Christmas and Christmas 2013 when we hosted two powerful and prominent installations, one outside the church and one inside. In 2013 our *Bethlehem Unwrapped* festival centred around a life-sized replica of the Israel-Palestine separation wall, or security barrier, across our courtyard and last year, to highlight the growing humanitarian crisis, we hosted *Flight*, in which an inflatable dinghy salvaged from the Greek island of Lesbos was suspended from the church ceiling. It hung upside down, mid-capsized with three lifejackets - two adult and one infant, making the link with the Holy Family - suspended beneath it. The salt and sand encrusted lifejackets of the other 59 survivors rescued from the dinghy were arranged around our nativity figures.

Although we've joked about having, by comparison, a quiet Christmas this year, "just some carols and a few mince pies", the reality is that for many of us, the absence of both those features is still palpable. It's as if they've left behind a virtual footprint. When we cross the courtyard to enter the church, we can still feel the resonance of the Wall, and the hundreds of people we encountered in front of it; some came to laud us, some came to berate us; some were simply surprised or curious; each with their own unique story. When we sing our carols, we can still feel the resonance of those 62 refugees; men, women and children, and although we may never meet them or even know their names, we are nonetheless inextricably linked with them, and this Christmas I find myself wondering where and how they are now. Each one will have their own unique story.

It's the same with our nativity figures, wrought from the trunk of the catalpa tree which used to grace our courtyard, and under which we would bless babies and infants immediately after baptising them. For years we had no idea that the infant Jesus lay hidden inside the catalpa's trunk, until the skilful eye and talented hands of woodcarver Clinton Challoner revealed him to us, along with his virgin mother, his father, two shepherds and three astounded magi. Each Christmas these figures whisper to me of the infants we blessed as I wonder where and how they are now. Each one will have their own unique story.

I'm also aware tonight of the absence of three older, wise and much loved members of our congregation who we've have lost in the last year – Tom Cook, Elisabeth Ratiu and very recently, James Stuart Douglas. It was fascinating at their funerals to learn of three completely different, richly varied and accomplished lives and to realise how little most of us knew of their earlier years and working lives. Each had their own unique story.

As we wonder, as I sure many do, of our dearly departed at Christmas, where and how they are now, we trust that they are at peace in the kingdom of God. In so doing, we come to understand the power of re-remembering, recognising once more that they are still a part of us, and always will be.

This has been a year of memorable, momentous and often surprising stories and unprecedented political change. At home we've had the story of how the UK decided to leave the EU. Six months later came the story of how a businessman with no political experience or qualifications, following a campaign distinctive for its rhetoric of division and discrimination, became President-Elect of the USA.

Both these stories are linked with those of a growing number of citizens who feel disenfranchised, disillusioned and downhearted, and placed a protest vote, more focused on sending a clear and unequivocal message to current leaders than, perhaps, on the reality of what they had voted for. Each will have their own unique story.

An ongoing and mounting feature of this year has been witnessing the horrors of the war on Syria. In October I visited Bosnia to learn first-hand from survivors about the siege of Sarajevo and the genocide at Srebrenica. Having heard their harrowing and heart-breaking stories, it's been sobering to see two of them, Nedžad and Hassan, featured in our media recently, providing thoughtful and insightful commentary on the desperate situation of the final days of the war in Aleppo; speaking and writing with the authority of experience in such terrible matters.

One of the questions we asked the survivors we met was "What message do you want us to take away and share?" They each had the same emphatic and urgent answer: "Don't ever get caught up in the rhetoric and mentality of 'us and them', because we know all-too-well where that can lead."

There's been a particularly disturbing rise in the 'us and them' rhetoric and mentality in much of our media this year; the same language of division which has contributed to a rise in hate crime, Islamophobia, homophobia and misogyny. Often

the power and responsibility that comes with storytelling is disregarded, or worse still, exploited.

While one story appears questioning how refugees can afford to have smartphones, another tells the story of young Syrian man who once had a lifestyle similar to ours, and whose mobile phone, with its 3G and satnav enabled him to call a friend in the US from a stricken, overcrowded and sinking dinghy in the Mediterranean and provide the exact GPS location of the boat, so the friend in America could alert the Turkish coastguard. Miraculously, everyone was rescued.

Without that phone, which no doubt also stored precious photographs and contact details for loved ones amongst many other functions and information, there would have been a tragic outcome. We each have a responsibility in both the hearing and the telling of stories – especially the true stories of other peoples' lives and experience.

The telling and hearing, the sharing of stories is vital. We need stories, we need the arts, imagination, other voices and perspectives to remind us that we are each of us unique and precious to God, and that there are many possibilities within us and our world - for good or ill.

It depends on how we tell the story - and where we see ourselves in it. It is through stories that we can better understand others, can begin to see the world through their eyes. Christ came to bring us together, not to divide; to suffer with us, that we might never again be alone.

The final week of Advent has been sobered by the desperate struggle to evacuate Syrian citizens from Aleppo, including hundreds of hungry, traumatized, injured, and sometimes orphaned, children. We know too, the devastating suffering and hardship facing Yemen and its children. And within the last week, we've seen another terrorist attack in Berlin. No doubt many, ourselves included, wonder where is God now?

Seeing the stunned faces of those desperate, silent children, covered in dust from bombing and shelling, a line from an old Peter Gabriel song keeps playing over in my head. "I come to you,

defences down, with the trust of a child". I come to you, defences down, with the trust of a child. The question uppermost in my mind preparing for tonight has been, how to celebrate Christmas, how to preach hope in a world so full of despair?

The miracle of the incarnation, of God taking flesh and coming to dwell among us, happens at the point where our unique, individual stories meet and intersect with the over-arching story of God. It is the biggest story of all and yet it's not remote or impersonal. It's not a story of God coming to earth in a blaze of glory, displaying imposing and intimidating power and control, surrounded by bodyguards and living behind security fences. It's the story of God coming to our world, defences down, with the trust of a child. Moreover, a vulnerable child, born to parents far from home in an occupied land, with nowhere to stay, into a family that, as a direct result of his birth, were about to become refugees. A child who would grow up to fall foul of the political and religious authorities of his day, and who would face terrible suffering, torture and ultimately execution. This is not a sentimental story of power or of control but a gritty story of sacrifice and love.

We need this night of miracle and mystery to remind us that our stories and God's story are inextricably linked; that there is no 'us and them', there is only us; that whatever our names or labels for God, we are all equally precious and cherished; and that God's love is limitless and unconditional.

Here in the middle of the night, in this holy place in the midst of the city, where generations have come to share their stories, their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears with one another and with God, we will soon hear once again the words of Christ, 'Do this is remembrance of me.'

As we share in the bread and the wine in that moment outside of time, we re-member and are re-membered as we join with one another, with all those we have loved and lost and with Christians throughout the world who gather around God's table this Christmas, in churches and cathedrals, in communities and congregations, in homes and in hiding.

Just as the footprint of the Wall and the suspended dinghy remind us that our stories and

our lives are linked with those in the Holy Land and those 62 rescued refugees, so the story of Christmas and this Eucharist in which we share, this footprint of the Last Supper, reminds us that Christ is not absent from our broken world, nor a distant memory, but once more dwells among us, a rich and resonant reality with the power to transform our hearts, our lives and our world. That is the source of our hope, and what and why and who we celebrate this Christmas.

When is the time for love to be born?  
The inn is full on the planet earth,  
And by greed and pride the sky is torn—  
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.\*

Amen.

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\*This is the final verse of the poem read as the introit at the beginning of the service:

### **The risk of birth**

This is no time for a child to be born,  
With the earth betrayed by war & hate  
And a nova lighting the sky to warn  
That time runs out & the sun burns late.

There was no time for a child to be born,  
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;  
Honour & truth were trampled by scorn –  
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?  
The inn is full on the planet earth,  
And by greed & pride the sky is torn –  
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

*Madeleine L'Engle*