

the tougher side of Christmas

In a number of ways, I can't help thinking of Christmas Day as a kind of holy 'morning after the night before'. On that first holy night, the stars shone brightly up above and a multitude of the heavenly host filled the skies singing and praising God. The shepherds – the first to receive this strange news – go charging down the hillside in search of the stable, to find and visit the child. We can imagine how the bewildering circumstances of Christ's birth along with sheer adrenalin carried Mary and Joseph through those first few unimaginable hours as new parents. Although he's not mentioned in the Bible, I wonder if Mary and Joseph also had a visit from the innkeeper, and what he must have made of this new arrival.

Of course, the reality would have been very different. For Mary the journey to Bethlehem must have been a huge strain and for Joseph, a source of constant worry. We can only imagine their growing sense of disbelief and desperation when they found there was no room at any of the inns in the town and that there was no choice but for Mary to give birth in an outhouse. And as for the visitors – these rough, gruff working men arriving excited and unannounced in the wee small hours not long after Mary has given birth to her firstborn, vulnerable and frightened, miles away from home and the usual support network of female relatives. I don't imagine Mary was in the mood for company and yet suspect neither she nor Joseph felt able to say no.

One of my favourite illustrations of the nativity is a simple line drawing by Rembrandt. It's called Holy Family with Angels and for me, it encapsulates the reality of their situation, that first Christmas morning. It's more of a rough sketch than a finished article, but it shows Mary and Joseph by the crib, Joseph lying fast asleep flat out on his back, and Mary hunched over the crib, head on her chest, also fast asleep. It perfectly captures their sheer exhaustion following the birth of Christ. The shepherds have been and gone, and although they are now parents to the Son of God, the whole experience is rather overwhelming, not to mention discombobulating, and utterly exhausting. They

are both spark out, literally hanging with fatigue and reliant upon the angels to watch over the child as they give in to the sheer weight of sleep. This is not some idealised Victorian manger scene, this is earthy and gritty, and real.

It's not just within the Christian story that there is this sense of the morning after the night before. I sense it too in our keeping of these feasts. Last night, for Midnight Mass, the church looked spectacular, with the artwork installation and the glow of the candles against the dark sky and city outside, and the sense of the numinous evoked by incense. The atmosphere was striking, full of mystery and awe; the music glorious. Whereas here, this morning, despite our beautifully dressed altar and the colourful candles along the altar rail, in the cold light of day, certainly the world outside looks decidedly grey, damp and distinctly average, and as much as we thoroughly enjoy celebrating the Feast of the Incarnation, for many who have been working particularly hard these last few days, despite the excitement and joy of our celebration, there is a touch of tiredness beginning to creep in for this final push of Christmas.

We have an even bigger juxtaposition when it comes to this extraordinary artwork above us (1). Each garment was salvaged from the beaches and refugees camps of Lesbos in Greece; all of these clothes were discarded by refugees; men, women and children just like us. And each is resonant of that long exhausting journey of Mary and Joseph. Take a moment to look up and take in the diversity of them – the different sizes and ages and colours. Not one of these garments would look out of place on the streets of our city. As Ivan touched on in his sermon yesterday, visitors have offered many observations and comments to describe what's above us – a starburst, a globe, a giant Christmas bauble, the drum of a washing machine, a model of fragmentation.

What strikes me most are the colours – so many of them vibrant and colourful – bold, happy prints, children's clothes that look ready for fun. I imagine that when their parents chose these cheerful

outfits - Daddy's No. 1 Striker, Mummy's Super Cool Dude, My First Ever Christmas!, Prince Charming - they had no idea that these outfits would be the ones their children would have to wear when fleeing for their lives. This is the reality of ordinary lives caught up in extraordinary times – quite literally the hopes and fears of all the years are met in these clothes today. As we celebrate the Incarnation, the Word made flesh, so too, this morning, we wonder about those who once wore these garments. We wonder if they are still on Lesbos or whether they've moved on somewhere new. We wonder if they're okay, whether they're with loved ones or have become separated; how the world looks to them this Christmas.

For most of us, Christmas is a time when we take stock; we reminisce about Christmases gone by, and remember those we've loved and lost. There have been some significant losses in our congregation this year, and we hold those individuals in our prayers, knowing that for many people, Christmas is a deeply challenging or painful day.

It can be difficult to know how to respond to the tougher side of Christmas; it's not often something that gets spoken about on the day, but it's not something we can ignore, sitting beneath these garments. They leave us in no doubt as to the suffering in our world.

At Christmas, we remember that the holy infant born to Mary and Joseph didn't stay a baby but grew up, and challenged both the political and religious authorities of his day. He chose to spend his time not with the rich and famous, but with those who were living on the edges, on the margins of society, often through no fault of their own. Those shepherds we've heard and thought about this morning would certainly have been on the margins, considered to be of questionable reputation. Jesus came to them and to all as the light of the world.

You will notice in the middle of this installation is a globe shaped light. It brightens and fades to reflect the reality of life as a refugee. Sometimes the light - the hope - is strong, other times it fades and flickers and is barely recognisable. For me, the most difficult moment of the random cycle is when, for a few seconds, the light goes out altogether, and I'm reminded of the moments of utter desperation and hopelessness experienced

by some of the men, women and children who once wore these clothes. Indeed, since the launch I've been haunted by a story the artist, Arabella Dorman, told about her Irish wolfhound, Zorba. She told of how when they first started to unpack the 26 boxes of clothing, gathered and packaged up by volunteers, Zorba, who is usually very laid-back and easy going, stayed trembling between her legs. The only explanation she can think of, is that, as the clothes had yet to be dry cleaned, the dog, with its keen nose, could smell the scent of fear still clinging to them.

I hope our response to this installation, both as individuals and as a church, will be to pledge to spread that light, the light of the Word made flesh, the light of hope. I hope we can find ways, in the words from one of my favourite hymns, to hold the Christ-light for others in the night time of their fear. I hope too, we can support others in fulfilling the God-given potential that shines within each and every person. I was reminded of this two days ago, when I received a Christmas card from someone who joined St James's when they were seeking asylum here in the UK and at the time, because they had no legal status, were unable to work. Now, several years on, their life is very different – they are happy and settled, working and part of a family. They wrote in the Christmas card, how important it was to them that when they looked back, over both the good memories and the bad ones, that St James's was a constant for them – a companion, a source of comfort, hope and strength. I pray we can together, continue to bear the Christ-light for those who are tired and scared and frightened.

When we see problems on the scale of the humanitarian crisis, it's very easy to feel despondent; to think that we can't make a difference, but believe me we can. The point of this installation is to make us feel guilty or despondent, but to inspire hope. We maybe can't make as big a difference as we would like, but nonetheless, we can do something, however small. And if you'd like to learn about practical ways in which you can respond, please do take a moment to read the information boards at the back of church or to visit our website.

It may be a bit of a grey day here in London, but it's Christmas. Today beneath these empty clothes, we celebrate the Word made flesh, the one who took flesh and lived among us, that we might see

his glory; that we might be touched by his glory; that we might be inspired to share the love and the hope we still find in him, two thousand years later; that we might share that light with a world by his love to be bearers of hope, to keep the flame alive for others when their struggle is hardest and we pray, that the day will come, when we may stand back and watch them shine.

We've acknowledged throughout the planning and arrival of this artwork, that it would have a profound impact on our celebration of Christmas, and that is certainly the case. It calls us not only to open ourselves to the suffering of others elsewhere in the world, but to acknowledge our own suffering and that of others here in our midst.

And so I close with a poem by Wendy Cope, called A Christmas Song. It not only acknowledges the suffering in our midst, but points to the hope embodied in the Incarnation, God with us:

*Why is the baby crying
On this, his special day,
When we have brought him lovely gifts
And laid them on the hay?*

He's crying for the people
Who greet this day with dread
Because somebody dear to them
Is far away or dead.

For all the men and women
Whose love affairs went wrong,
Who try their best at merriment
When Christmas comes along,

For separated parents
Whose turn it is to grieve
While children hang their stockings up
Elsewhere on Christmas Eve.

For everyone whose burden,
Carried through the year,
Is heavier at Christmastime,
The season of good cheer.

That's why the baby's crying
There in the cattle stall:
He's crying for those people,
He's crying for them all.

(1) 'Suspended' is an art installation hanging over the nave of St James's Church from late December 2017 to early February 2018. It is composed of hundreds of items of clothing discarded by refugees arriving on the Greek island of Lesbos. Image right. Artist Arabella Dorman: www.arabelladorman.com See also www.sjp.org.uk/suspended

