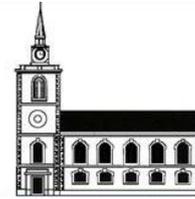


**PARISH CAROLS 2018**



The news broadcaster Huw Edwards was due to take part in a carol service here this week but he had to cancel at the last minute because, well, there was some news. He sent a message to the congregation apologizing and wished them specifically a “politics free Christmas”. Not much chance of that really – and to be honest, we’ve spent much time at this church over years – not just this year - making sure that Christmas doesn’t get too gloopy and tinselly – and that we do get political at Christmas, addressing issues of forced migration, homelessness, the situation of modern day Bethlehem and so on. We do not believe in a privatized spirituality that means Christmas assumes everyone has a safe family to withdraw to – and that this is the Victorian ideal we want to peddle. That’s why many of us will be here on Christmas Day not only taking part in our Eucharist but having a huge Christmas lunch together – serving food to all comers from all corners of London and the world.

But what I want to suggest tonight is that if we go too hard on the politics, and stand rightly against the privatized spirituality that we think is damaging, we face a danger ourselves as people of faith. Which is that we confuse the private with the personal. And throw out, if you will pardon the Christmas pun, the baby with the bathwater.

While Christmas should not be privatized, it is certainly personal.

Over the next week, spend, if you can, some time sitting quietly, either somewhere at home or in a park or in a church. Just take away the distractions and take a moment to contemplate the mystery of God being born. And take a moment to contemplate the reality that you have been born. Whoever it was to, wherever it happened, however it came about, you have been born: somehow you made the journey from the womb to the world.

The Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt said that we human beings need a fundamental re-orientation in terms of how we think of ourselves. We call ourselves mortals because we define ourselves by our death. We are focused on our mortality. And most often, we’re afraid of it. Instead she suggested, what would life be like if we defined ourselves not by our death but by our birth. We could call ourselves natalis. Our trajectory through life then, as people who have been born, and who are continuing to be born, is to the future, deeply rooted in the energy of our beginnings. It is a life lived on tiptoe, curious, open hearted, ready to learn again how to speak and how to walk our path. It is a life in which we are not afraid to cry or even scream sometimes. Where we know our interdependence on

all that lives and where we are not ashamed of our tears. That God is somehow born, in mystery and also in a fleshly bloody humanity, is an astonishing and creative way of thinking about the divine presence in the world. And so this Christmas, I ask you to do two things. For yourself, not for the good of society or to make the world a better place (although your doing this will also do some of that).

First, take some time – it can be 10 minutes or half an hour – whatever you are able to do. Be quiet somewhere and say to yourself “I have been born”. Remember that you have been born, and see where this divine knowledge leads you.

Second, take another chunk of time. It can be 10 minutes or half an hour or anything in between. And visit the Bethlehem inside you. A still, luminous place of wonder and hope. A place inside you where you know how much love you have to give and you want to find a way to give it. Where you remember again that this moment, this day, this body that you have,

the spirit that you have – is all a gift – to you – for you. The Bethlehem inside you is a still place, a mystical place where gifts are exchanged, where promises are made, where meaning is deepened and where love is declared.

Those of us who have been born are living propelled by the energy of that journey which sent us into this life. What is impossible can become possible. What is stuck can be freed. The waters of the spirit break over us and the ungovernable energy of living takes us into the world. And into the next world beyond too, when that time comes.

Christmas, understood in this way, is a gentle but persistent song sung by the angels in all eternity that it is never too late to begin again. And that our calling as natalis is to live as creatively and openly as we can, making our mistakes, asking for forgiveness and forgiving others and ourselves in return. And accompanied by that song, we learn to pray the old prayer in an entirely new way... Christ, be born in us today. Amen.