

Who am I?

There's a prayer written by Christian Aid which during this season of Christmas we use during the weekday services. You'll know that every day we have Morning Prayer at half past eight over in the side chapel and we have two Eucharists – one on a Tuesday at lunchtime and one on a Thursday early in the morning. The prayer goes like this:

When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins: to find all those who are lost, to heal the ones who are broken, to feed those who are hungry, to release the prisoners, to rebuild the nations to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart.

It's a lovely prayer – and when I pray it, I'm often moved. Because it's talking about right now – the Christmas Midnight Mass and celebration lunch are over.

For most people out there, Christmas begins sometime in October and ends on 25 December. There's a slow crescendo happening all through December, party venues and concert venues are booked up every night ages in advance – including this church – and right now, well after New Year's Eve tonight, people are contemplating dry January, new fitness regimes, new low carb low fat diets and what more could you want from your new year than a super duper fit bit.

But in church, we are doing exactly the opposite. We have been fasting all December, wearing purple, listening to the prophets. Here at St James's during Advent, we read the riotous book of Revelation each week in our Bible study sessions before the service – which we discovered was a blistering critique of corrupt human culture, and a call back to trust in God and God alone. It was strong stuff. Prophetic and challenging to the core.

But now, we are in full on party mode – we have our celebration clothes on – our language and songs are full of praise - and we are about to embark on the season of Epiphany – the season of miracles and wonderment.

For us, Christmas *began* in the middle of the night on 24 December and January is anything but dry.

But there is something that bothers me about that Christian Aid prayer – even though its sentiment and timing is inspiring – when it says that after the song of the angels is stilled and the star in the sky is gone, the real work of Christmas begins.....

I think it's because it focuses us again on our activism so soon after the story of Christmas has been told. And the story of Christmas – is this story ("[Suspended](#)", the installation made of discarded clothes from refugees in Greece) – the story of families rootless and running away from danger – but it is also the original story – (as expressed by our carved nativity figures) the story of stillness and contemplation.

And so today I want to spend a couple of minutes talking about that balance which is so hard to achieve, especially in a faith that wants to make a difference, to get somewhere, to make the world a better place. And that's the balance between action and contemplation. Something to think about as this year turns.

One of the lessons we learned from the Book of Revelation during December is the huge topic of what in Hebrew teaching is called *idolatry*. That is, in contemporary thinking – setting out the differing and competing motivations of our lives, recognising them for what they are and making a choice.

Idolatry might sound as if it's a bit of an outmoded concept. But actually it's thoroughly contemporary. Because it causes us to ask ourselves some really fundamental questions. What are the driving motivations in your life? How do you decide where to live, what to spend your money on, who to communicate with, what job to do, when to stop doing something or seeing someone? What are the frameworks, sometimes the unwritten rules that govern our life's direction and shape?

During Advent, the writer of Revelation, John, offered an incredibly vivid critique of what he identified as idolatry; that is, being faithful to, loyal to, focussed on, *any other goals or purposes other than our core purpose* which is abundant life in God.

One of the main critiques of church by people who don't attend services is something like – we talk a good talk but we don't walk the walk. We don't put into practice what we believe. That's always a really good critique and one we must listen to carefully.

But I'm taking a slightly different tack today – because for a church that is active in social justice issues – like this one - it's important for us to say that yes, this is the contemporary Christmas story being played out here in front of us in Europe today in the refugee crisis – of course - but we mustn't, in all our activism, forget that Christmas is also the spiritually explosive reality of God being born in history in Jesus, as expressed in these nativity figures. What I'm trying to say is, we mustn't fall into the opposite danger.

Clergy are often described as being too heavenly minded as to be no earthly good. That's important to listen to. But it's equally important that we don't busy ourselves with vacuous over activity, believing that we alone, or politics alone, or emotional intelligence alone or therapeutic work alone can change the world. This kind of thinking is equally, in the Biblical term, idolatrous.

When we place all our trust in the plans and schemes we have made ourselves, we find that they are as dead-eyed as the statues made by the crowd so criticised by Moses in the desert.

It is so important to talk about the Bethlehem that is real – it's vital if we are to avoid celebrating a Christmas scene that is no more real than Narnia. But this activism, dealing with the world as it is, the practical welcome this church wants to offer to people who are homeless, seeking asylum, will only be authentic when it is rooted in our contemplative life. In running projects, holding events, raising money, we can't lose sight of our origin and purpose: God from whom we have come, and to whom we will return when all our running around is over.

These nativity figures are not here to look pretty. They're here as a way of expressing what is inside each of us – because I think there is, amongst all the activity of life, work, faith, home, there is a symbolic Bethlehem inside each of us, which has the sense of these figures.

Your symbolic Bethlehem is a place inside you - a still place- a holy and hidden place we approach with wonder and awe, and not a little trepidation. A place of new beginnings and first loves, the place where we remember what we hoped for when we

started. It's an *uncynical* and rather tender place where we know deep down that it's never too late to start again, whatever our age, background, experience or struggles. If we can find this Bethlehem under the tinsel and the activism, it's a beautiful place to revisit and, even now, reconnect with our better selves, or even find God that sometimes we're not sure is there or feel a little foolish for believing in.

Your heart becomes a chapel, at the same time still and peaceful, and also ablaze with new creative energy.

This coming year, 2018, a group of us will go on a parish pilgrimage to Berlin, Auschwitz and Nuremberg. We want to try to face together the bleakest moment in the story of our continent, and understand more deeply the birth of human rights after the desolate events of the Holocaust. It will be really challenging. But as in all our activities and projects, I hope it will be a time of combined activism and contemplation. Because there are some sights and sounds that draw us to our knees and bring us to silence.

Our spiritual companion on that trip – and we're visiting his house in Berlin at the beginning – is the Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Just 3 days after Adolf Hitler was elected in 1933, Bonhoeffer named what he thought he saw as idolatry: a fanatical commitment to Hitler – to the human leader – which he saw as wrong, because his loyalty had to be to God alone. In a pointed phrase on the radio, he commented that *Gott ist mein Fuhrer*.

It was this commitment to God that made him fearless, enabling him to oppose Hitler from the very beginning when most other church leaders didn't. In July 1944, not long before he was executed by the Nazis, he wrote a poem called "Who am I"?, now published in the book that became a 20th century classic "Letters and Papers from Prison".

What he writes is deeply reassuring, given that he is one of the spiritual giants of the last century. His uncertainty is striking; maybe this hero of the resistance is perhaps more like you and me than we might think.

*Who am I? They often tell me
I step out from my cell
calm and cheerful and poised,
like a squire from his manor.*

*Who am I? They often tell me
I speak with my guards
freely, friendly and clear,
as though I were the one in charge.*

*Who am I? They also tell me
I bear days of calamity
serenely, smiling and proud,
like one accustomed to victory.*

*Am I really what others say of me?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
Restless, yearning, sick, like a caged bird,
struggling for life breath, as if I were being
strangled,
starving for colours, for flowers, for birdsong,
thirsting for kind words, human closeness,
shaking with rage at power lust and pettiest insult,
tossed about, waiting for great things to happen,
helplessly fearing for friends so far away,
too tired and empty to pray, to think, to work,
weary and ready to take my leave of it all?*

*Who am I? This one or the other?
Am I this one today and tomorrow another?
Am I both at once? Before others a hypocrite
and in my own eyes a pitiful, whimpering
weakling?*

*Or is what remains in me like a defeated army,
Fleeing in disarray from victory already won?*

*Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions
of mine.*

Whoever I am, you know me. O God, I am yours.

The church, like any group, like any of us as individuals, can indulge in displacement activity; tackling the obvious things, maybe more concrete things – because the really big things are just too hard.

My prayer for us together in this church St James's in the coming year 2018 is not so much that our communal life will become more active, or more exciting for its own sake; those things may or may not happen; but that our knowledge of God and our commitment to living might deepen – as individuals and together. That together we might learn more and more profoundly that our security is not located in our relationships to each other, or in our hard work, or our status or wealth or even our own visions of the future, however worthy or noble. Our security and purpose is rooted in our acceptance that we are given our name, our life, our direction by God – whose presence might well be visible in those things. But that we might know more and more deeply, in a very uncertain and troubling world, that perhaps our only task is to

put our hand in the hand of God and step into the unknown. (cf The Gate of the Year Minnie Louise Haskins 1875-1957)

Some of you will know that I trained to be a priest at an ecumenical college where Methodists were in the majority (Queen's College Birmingham). One of the many things I learned from Methodism was that at this time of year, Methodist churches hold their covenant services – a service of dedication that uses a beautiful prayer called the Covenant prayer written by John Wesley, who in addressing God with his hopes and fears for the future helps us do the same. And so as this year ends and another one begins, I end this sermon with the prayer – and if you would like to, as you hear the words, do pray it with me.

*I am no longer my own but yours.
Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you
will,
Put me to doing, put me to suffering;
Let me be employed for you
or laid aside for you,
exalted for you, or brought low for you;
Let me be full, let me be empty,
let me have all things, let me have nothing;
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your
pleasure and disposal,
and now glorious and blessed God, you are mine
and I am yours.
So be it.
And the covenant now made on earth, let it be
ratified in heaven. Amen.*