

The Revd Lindsay Meader

New Year's Day/The Naming and Circumcision of Christ 2017 and the baptism of Callum Sava

Luke 2:15-21

## Everyday miracles in the middle of Christmas

This morning I want to begin with a prayer by Christian Aid, which is particularly apt for this New Year's Day:

At the dawn of a new year,  
we come to welcome hope for a new world.

Let the darkness lift,  
to welcome a dawn of plenty,  
with enough for everyone  
and people ready to share.

Let the day begin,  
with new energy for the struggle  
to protect our children  
and to care for the vulnerable.

Let the light shine,  
to open a path to safety  
for all who are seeking home  
and longing for life.

Let the sun rise  
on new talks and new resolve  
to end the bombing and the terror  
and to find solutions that will last.

At the dawn of a new year  
we come to declare our hope  
and to welcome a new world.

**Amen.**

I've lost count of the number of comments and references I've seen or heard over the last week from people who couldn't wait to put 2016 behind them. Given the devastating war in Syria, a number of terrible terrorist attacks in European cities, the murder of an elderly French priest while celebrating Mass, the growing crisis in Yemen, and the hotly contested and almost too-close-to-call big political upheavals such as Brexit and the US Presidential elections, along with what seemed like an unprecedented number of deaths of people who weren't just celebrities but cultural icons – it's easy to understand a lot of people's eagerness to put the past behind us and hope for better for this new year.

However, what it's easy to overlook, because such events don't receive masses of publicity, is that for a lot of people, some truly wonderful things happened last year. A number of our winter shelter guests found accommodation – a place to call their own, a lot of people beat cancer, others who had been on organ donation waiting lists for months or years finally got the call they'd been longing for, small charities received unexpected large donations, young athletes achieved personal bests, children were adopted, people who had almost given up hope finally landed a new job, a number of ordinary everyday people won the lottery, scientists made new breakthroughs in treating serious diseases, a number of non-verbal

autistic children spoke their first words, and closer to home, our Head Verger got engaged and baby Callum, who we baptise today, was born to Frank and Carolyn.

There are everyday miracles happening all around us, but so often, we simply don't have eyes to see, or even time to recognise them. Today, these first hours of a New Year, falling this year as they do, on a Sunday, give us the perfect opportunity to slow down and reflect, to look backwards as well as forwards. Today, a whole new year lies stretching ahead of us, full of potential and possibility, just like the life of young Callum.

It's exactly a week since Christmas Day, since we knelt to peer into the manger at the very face of God, and we are at odds with the passage of time in the city outside. Here, we are still in the middle of the twelve days of Christmas, whereas in the city outside, the Christmas sandwiches have already been retired, the festive food is on sale and within days, mark my words, will have given way to displays of Easter eggs, even before the magi have put in an appearance.

But here this morning, as we slow down time, we move out of *chronos*, chronological time and into *Kairos*, God's time. We pause to linger as the angels retreat and the shepherds start running full pelt down the hillside before catching their breath as they enter the rough-hewn sanctuary of the stable to wonder at the baby lying in the straw.

No doubt Bethlehem that night was as busy as this city last night and Mary and Joseph would have been just another couple far from home in the midst of the crowds. Even her stomach, swollen in the final stages of pregnancy, would not have drawn much more than a glance, and perhaps a sympathetic look, but her plight was still not enough to secure a room. No doubt there would have been other pregnant women like Mary, who had no choice but to give birth far from home; just as there have been many refugees in our time forced to give birth far from home, some no longer knowing what or where home is. But then again, there was no one quite like Mary. No one else had received that mysterious visit from the Angel Gabriel, no one else had been overshadowed by the Holy Spirit to conceive the Son of God. But still, without the angels to alert the shepherds, the new baby would have been noticed only by the innkeeper.

This is part of the paradox of the Incarnation, that God comes to earth in the humblest form possible, not just a vulnerable helpless baby, but one born in a stable, to a unmarried teenager with her older fiance, miles from home, in the middle of the night, far from family and friends; an arrival noticed only by a group of rough shepherds more used to life in the hills than the city. It is a miracle hidden in plain sight; an entrance not even the magi could have expected or predicted. It is God doing something completely new.

The shepherds' reaction is real and honest. They recognise immediately that the angels were speaking or singing the truth – that this helpless babe is the Son of God. They have no need to stay on for the formalities, the rituals according to the law, but depart, to return to their duties. Luke is very clear that as they returned to their flocks, they would share their story with any and everyone who would listen. And those who heard the tale were amazed, perhaps, especially because this is the last thing they would expect to hear from this bunch of shepherds who are nevertheless completely convinced of the veracity of the story they share. Luke tells us that their praising and glorifying God is spontaneous and equally sincere. Again, this account goes against all our stereotypes of typical shepherds.

Mary's response to their visit is much quieter and more reflective. Mary says very little; still waters run deep. Luke tells us simply that she "treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Perhaps it is only now that Mary begins to understand the enormity of her calling, now she cradles this little baby in her arms at the end of a long uncomfortable journey and a birth in conditions that were far from ideal and perhaps even further from how she imagined the angel's words would come to pass.

Today, with Mary, as we prepare to baptise Callum, we are invited to ponder on the miracle and mystery of the birth of Christ and as we do so we realise that every birth contains both miracle and mystery; that out of human love comes new life, a whole new person, and that love is also and always a creative force; creative and generative and transformative.

We are reminded that every child is a gift from God. Every child is a sign of hope. Every child is a sign that God wants the world to continue. Just as Mary and Joseph presented Jesus to be named and circumcised, so today, Carol and Frank present Callum to be baptised, recognising him as a gift of God. Baptism is a sacrament – an outward and visible sign of an inward and invisible grace.

An older and wiser priest than I once told me he loves baptising babies and infants, because when you look into their eyes, they still have what he calls that “fresh from the Maker” glow. In giving thanks for the gift of Callum today, we recognise and give thanks for the claim God has on his life.

New Year’s Day may seem a symbolic date for this sacrament, but the most important symbolism comes from the signs and objects we use to hint at what we cannot fully articulate: water to speak of washing, cleansing and new beginning; oil to speak of the blessing of God’s Holy Spirit, and a candle to symbolise the light of Christ. For the promises Callum’s parents and Godparents make today go way deeper than New Year resolutions.

As we welcome Callum into the worldwide family of the church, we are mindful of ourselves and all those who have found their lives, their outlook, their mind-set, their spirits and souls transformed by entering into and seeking a deeper relationship with the God who is love. Most of the time this hasn’t happened in a big or showy way but often gradually and quietly, after much thought and reflection and a gradual opening of heart and mind.

What we do here in church is, in the eyes of the world, under the radar as it takes places inside, behind closed doors, just like that holy birth, and the visitation of the shepherds. Except today, we go outside – in an act of witness, we proclaim in our courtyard what we believe and enact here in church, that God is alive and that Christmas comes to us still today – in the sacrament of baptism, in water and wine and in the gift of a child. We take this infant, this little boy out into the world of chronos, where the crowds are gathering for the New Year’s Day parade with Christmas now done and dusted. We will gather in kairos, in God’s time under our tree, still in the midst of Christmas, this holy season of hope, as we pray for God’s blessing upon the everyday miracle that is Callum.

And then, when we return into church, we share in another sacrament, that of the Eucharist, where once more in a moment beyond and outside of time, joined by angels, archangels and all the host of heaven, those who have gone before us from chronos to kairos, we share in bread and wine, beginning this new year and continuing this Christmastide in praise and thanksgiving for the Word made flesh.

I began with a prayer by Christian Aid, and I close with a prayer by Walter Brueggemann:

Our times are in your hands:

    But we count our times for us;

        we count our days and fill them with us;

        we count our weeks and fill them with our busyness;

        we count our years and fill them with our fears.

And then caught up short with your claim,

    Our times are in your hands!

Take our times, times of love and times of weariness,  
Take them all, bless them and break them,  
    give them to us again,  
        slow paced and eager,  
        fixed in readiness for neighbour.  
Occupy our calendars,  
Flood us with itsy-bitsy, daily *kairoi*,  
in the name of your fleshed *kairos*. Amen.

Lindsay Meader