

## **Christmas Midnight Sermon 2024.**

**Rt Revd Christopher Herbert**

A few headlines from the last five years: Brexit in 2020; Covid and its lockdowns in 2020 and 2021: by the end of the pandemic almost one quarter of a million deaths had been recorded in the UK. Storm Ciara and Storm Dennis hit in 2020. The FTSE 100 dropped by 10% in the same year and UK Government Debt rose to £2 trillion. Sarah Everard was murdered by a policeman in March 2021; Prince Philip died in April 2021. Whilst we were all in lockdown there were drinks parties at Number 10; Kabul fell to the Taliban in August 2021; Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022; the Queen died in September 2022; there have been four Prime Ministers since 2020: Johnson, Truss, Sunak and Starmer; Hamas attacked Israel and took hostages in October 2023 and there have been major displacements and deaths of Palestinians and Israelis ever since; there were nurses' strikes in December 2022 and the first months of 2023, and teachers' strikes in the same year, plus innumerable train drivers' strikes between 2022 and 2024... In July 2024 there was a mass stabbing of children in Southport... Over 6 million people were on the NHS waiting list at October 2024, Syria fell to an insurgency in November 2024, and named storms continue to hurl themselves at our country....and then, the icing on the cake...small and large businesses were hammered in the Budget a few weeks ago.

And, closer to home, I am bound to mention the recent upheavals in the Church of England...

Then, in addition to those grim headlines, I suspect that every adult here tonight will have stories to tell of their own sufferings, relationship breakdowns, unemployment, and bereavements since Christmas 2020.

Is it any wonder that after five years like that, we are all feeling bruised and battered?

And yet...and yet...we are still here. As Churchill once said, we have learnt to KBO (I won't spell out what the initials stand for...not in a sermon)... which suggests to me that we are more courageous and more resilient than we sometimes think we are. So, congratulations are in order. We have survived.

But, now let us change focus from the global to the local. We are here at a Midnight mass...and that is amazing in itself. I guess the reasons we are here are many: perhaps, it's nostalgia for Christmases past, because as we sing carols, memories of childhood Christmases come flooding back: the excitement of the orange at the foot of a darned grey woollen sock...and grandfather wearing a paper crown which is askew, slumped half asleep in an armchair after Christmas dinner with a small gravy stain on his waistcoat...and the excitement of the new shiny bike or the first watch... I am not knocking nostalgia...after our experiences of the past few years, nostalgia seems to me to be a healthy and enjoyable reaction...so, let nostalgia rip... it's a way we can integrate our past experiences with our present lives

But it could also be that we are here tonight because we are emotionally moved by the story of the birth of a baby in a manger, with angels fracturing the sky with their songs, and shepherds stumbling down the hillside towards Bethlehem, and exotic eastern Kings processing on haughty camels... There is something about this story, which we sense, not so much with our minds but with our emotions...we sense a world of joy, almost, but not quite, within our reach. It is a story which touches the emotional well-springs of our humanity and releases, even if only for a few minutes, our tentative and heart-felt yearnings for wholeness. As we listen to it, we are on emotional tiptoe, standing at the edge of wonder.

But then, because we are human, we move from our emotions to the top-most surface of our minds and ask a question: is this story true? And to try to find answers, we ask more questions, such as, how do we know that there were three kings? Did the star really move? Was it a supernova? And we might even begin to preen ourselves for being so intelligent as to ask such questions.

However. Let us consider the Christmas story holistically. In this act of worship the stories and the carols, the music and the silence are like fragments in a kaleidoscope, and every time we sing a carol, or look at candlelight, or hear the familiar words, the patterns in the kaleidoscope shift again and again into new shapes. And we find that we need time to reflect on what we are experiencing. So, we begin to move downwards to that deep inner place in ourselves where our emotions and our mind and our sense of self meet. As we do so, we find that the question of truth reframes itself. Instead of asking the superficial question, 'Is it true?' we are now asking, 'What truth does the story point towards?'

It is a question which each of us can only answer in our own way, and to which we need to bring our personal integrity: does this story reveal (it's the only possible word), that God is? Does it reveal that God comes to us in love and humility...as a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger?

If it is the case that in Jesus Christ, God reveals himself to humanity then it brings us very close to that joy which lies behind and within all joy; it brings us very close to that beauty which lies within and behind all beauty; it brings us very close to that truth which lies behind and within all truth. In short, it brings us very close to God... and so, if that is the truth towards which the story points, then no matter what the future might hurl at us, God's joy and beauty and truth and peace, will strengthen and nourish who we are and will help us discover what we should do with our lives...

I pray therefore, that the joy and beauty, and the truth of Christ will enfold us all this holy night and will guide each one of us with love into the future...