

Midnight Mass 2017

Luke 2:8-20

Let's start in Lidl. I know you hoped that there would be no more supermarkets for a couple of days, but let me take you back to Lidl. For Christmas 2017 Lidl gave us the *cavalier carver*, the man who can really boss the turkey. And, in a separate advert, they introduced the *double dipper* the woman at the party who takes a bite and then puts the spring roll *back* in the chilli dip. Now, if you did not know it already, you really must not do this if you are invited to a party in Clifton. It is slow motion horror all round. Christmas, Lidl tells us, can be a challenge. Meanwhile, in an Aldi advert, which I really wish I could not remember so clearly, we met a carrot. This was a carrot that had fallen in love (the way carrots so famously do). To reach the carrot of its dreams, it had to make a terrible journey across a laden Christmas table. Christmas, you see, can be a challenge. And, because this is the cathedral and you may not be an Aldi, or a Lidl, sort of shopper, Waitrose also had a story to tell. There, it was a group snowed in, high up, at the pub on Tan Hill. How would they cope? Would they have food? Christmas *really* can be a challenge.

Christmas adverts tell a story and the story they tell has a pattern. Christmas can go wrong; there is a risk. Then, in the happy ending, Christmas becomes safe. The adverts tell us that. Now, they have got part of the story absolutely right. We know the Christmas story here. The story we tell, about a pregnant girl so nearly abandoned by her fiancée, a perilous journey to Bethlehem, and no room in the inn, *that* story tells us that Christmas was a challenge from the beginning. This is *exactly* what St Luke wants us to know. He wants us to notice that all this nearly did not happen. It nearly went wrong. He keeps telling us that. St Matthew makes the same point, Herod wanted to kill a child who should really never have been born. Christmas, God's great project was fragile from the first. It was a risk. If what you offer is love you are taking a risk. It can go wrong.

Let's stay with the adverts a moment longer. If you have seen the John Lewis version, you will have met a monster under the bed (which may, or may not, belong to Chris Riddle). It is a monster that nearly ruins Christmas, but rescues things at the last moment. At Marks and Spencer, Paddington Bear is the savior.

That's enough, you want me to take you to Bethlehem not down the seasonal aisle of Sainsbury's. But notice the story these adverts tell. Christmas is a risk, it needs saving. And when it has been saved, by the monster under the bed, or by Paddington Bear, it ends happily, indoors, with presents and round a table, with a turkey.

Part of that Christmas story is quite right. The risky part, the story about it all being about to go wrong. And part of the story is absolutely wrong. So, now let's set out for Bethlehem.

What did we hear tonight?

...there were shepherds living in the fields

Notice, that they were *living* in the fields. New Testament scholars scowl at each other at seminars when they talk about the shepherds. There is an argument about whether the shepherds had court orders and a history of disorderly conduct, or, alternatively, were just a bit short on the social graces. What is certain is that shepherds were outsiders, literally; they lived outside. They could never be here, with us. They were not religious and they were not reliable. You would not take them to that party where they are passing round the chilli dip. They did not belong.

That is the first point. Whatever else we say about Christmas it really is not an indoor feast. It does not draw the curtains and sit by the fire. The scene is a hillside, or it is a barn. There was no room inside, remember. There never was, read on in this gospel and you will hear Jesus remark that animals have homes, but he does not. Jesus is not an 'insider'. This story is never that contained, that cosy.

Then there is the bit of the story we nearly always overlook. The shepherds see angels

...the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified

They were terrified. The translation tidies it up, *they feared with great fear*. That is a theme in the gospel. When Zechariah met an angel and heard he would be the father of John the Baptist, he feared, in Greek, *tarasso*. When Mary hears the news she will give birth she is troubled, in Greek, *diatarasso*. It is a word you can use for boats on a stormy sea. They all had to be told not to be afraid. They were not wrong to be afraid, they were absolutely right, they saw the seriousness of things, the difference between light and dark. They saw what love and peace can really look like and knew how wrong we are about both. They were right to be fearful, they had been brought to the edge of the cliff for the best view. They had to be told to manage that fear, to listen to what comes next.

The Christmas story we started with, thanks to Lidl, Aldi, Waitrose and all the others is about a risk that can be managed, at least if you have help with the packing. The Christmas story here is about risk and then it is about *fear*, something altogether bigger than risk. It is not going to be managed. It is not going away. It never moves indoors so you can draw the curtains on the cold. When the glory of God breaks out, fear is what you feel. It is what you will always feel. The host of heaven appears on the hillside, the shepherds stare straight into glory and they are afraid.

Up in the night sky, the angels sing about peace.

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!

That is not cosy; that is politics. Peace where there is violence and repression. Peace for some and not others. Christmas does not move indoors it is loose in the world and it wants things different, sees things differently, it is a story that is not moving swiftly to a conclusion it is story that has a long way to go.

Tomorrow, we will mitigate the risks, we will draw the curtains, and we should. I will do that too. If we are lucky enough to be able to do it we should celebrate. Bring Christmas inside and make it safe for a time. Make no mistake though, the view tonight is endless, eternal. The love of God at risk in a world that always draws the curtains against the cold. The peace of God hard to see and hear in Syria, Myanmar, Yemen, Iraq, Afghanistan, South

Sudan, That is what the Christmas story is about. It is absolutely an invitation to go outside and look at the view. See what the angels saw and announce a change. God comes amongst us to ask us to live in peace, to summon us to love one another. God comes amongst us and tonight he is not at home he is on the streets and in the shelters. He comes to make a difference and that is where it begins.