

Christmas Morning Bristol Cathedral 2016

Luke 2:1-14

A young woman in a hospital, she has small children with her. Her husband is terminally ill. She gets up to go, and a nurse asks where she is going. 'We have no food at home, I am going shopping' she says, and leaves. When she gets to the supermarket, children in tow, someone is waiting for her. "Give me your shopping list, go the café, we are going to treat your family to supper and we will do your shopping'. She told me the story herself and thought that she had learnt something about love and the kindness of strangers.

We will come back to her, after I have said something about Christmas. For three weeks people have been telling me 'This must be your busy time of year'. In fact, I enjoy Christmas in the Cathedral. However, just out of sight this morning, I have ashen-faced colleagues. They have been really busy. They have wrestled with fifteen foot Christmas trees, and cleaned up after a donkey. They have lit just shy of eight hundred candles and put them out again. They have put up staging for concerts, and carol services, and end of term assemblies. They have listened to *Hark the Herald* nearly every day for a month and mopped up more mulled wine than you can ever imagine. They have been *really* busy. And this afternoon they will close their eyes and dream of Lent.

They know that Christmas arrives playing an organ and waving a cracker. They know it is busy and brash; lit with coloured lights and hung with baubles. Not just carol services, but all those presents, the cooking, the ho-ho-hoing and the business of explaining to Uncle Phil that it really wasn't Colonel Mustard in the Library, because you are playing monopoly. For some, Christmas is quiet, or even sad, but the big, bright Christmas we see in the shops, and the adverts shouts out at us; it wants our attention.

That is how it is. The Christmas story has *always* been full of bustle and bravado. It has always had that distraction. The temptation at Christmas is to tell the *wrong* story. It is what the gospel says.

We have just heard Luke tell us

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus

Now that sounds like a history lesson; a bit like 'In 1066 when Harold was King of England...' But, it is actually not about dates. Luke gives us a list of names and places – Augustus, Quirinius, Nazareth, Bethlehem... He does that to tell us that Jesus was born into a world where orders were being shouted, where the weak obeyed the strong and the strong feared the emperor. People talked about peace and managed not to notice that Augustus had annexed Egypt, invaded the Balkans, and conquered Spain.

Before ever we get to Bethlehem, Luke makes us think about uniforms and swords, about plans and broken promises. Luke really wants us to notice that Jesus was born while everyone was looking the other way. Over *there* Bethlehem, and over *here* Gaius Octavius called *Augustus* a name which means 'to increase'. A baby in a manger, or an emperor who just gets greater.

The Augustus story is the kind we know very well. It is power and politics. It is the noisy story we have been hearing all year, plans and gestures, pledges and U-turns, taking control and being great. It is the story that is always there. And while that happens a couple in a remote province slip unnoticed into the streets of Bethlehem.

We have got so good at Christmas, so good at spotting the baby in the manger, so good at seeing the star in the sky, so good at the herald angels that we have forgotten that the wise men got lost and had to stop and ask, forgotten that there was no room, forgotten that the angels went and sang to the wrong sort of people, because no one else was listening.

You see, Christmas is a *different* story, another way of looking things, the whisper of God when the world is shouting about something else. Over there is the big story, the manifesto, the peace keepers (who, oddly, are so heavily armed), the strategic intervention. And *here* there is Christmas. That is what Luke is trying to get us to see, that we keep getting distracted by the noise and the drama. We set our hope on the big solutions, we follow the flag, we rally to the bugle. The noise gets worse and there is no room at the inn.

My house will be full of people today, it will be noisy and I will enjoy that, but I must not get distracted. Christmas starts small, as small as human life can be. It is easily over-looked and it is surprisingly ordinary. Just a baby and his mother, a few strangers and a startling hope.

That is Christmas; that is what the presence and power of God looks like: a baby and his mother, a life of love and hope.

The gracious lady taking her children to the supermarket talked about acts of kindness, about friends, family and strangers. It is same the commitment that is asked of all of us. It is Christmas, God himself commits to the task of living life fully. Nothing more, nothing less. God lives in love and hope. We can look elsewhere, we can look to the platforms of power, but salvation is a different story. Salvation is human love and human hope. It is here; we only have to join in.