

Sermon for Evensong on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 23rd December 2018
Isaiah 10:33-11:10, Matthew 1:18-25

‘In the bleak midwinter’; ‘Snow had fallen, snow on snow’; ‘Good King Wenceslas looked out ... deep and crisp and even’. But Bethlehem is a hot place, dusty rather than snowy. I suppose carols and hymns can be rather an unreliable source of proper geographical information. ‘And did those feet .. walk upon England’s green and pleasant land?’

I don’t suppose they sing ‘Jerusalem’ in Italy, or in France or in Germany. Or if they do, presumably those feet were walking in the Black Forest or on the Palatine Hill, or maybe, in the Bois de Boulogne. There is, if we are literal about it, quite a lot of nonsense which we happily tolerate at this time of year. Things that appear to go completely contrary to common sense; like snow in Bethlehem. It probably was quite cold at night in the stable, once the sun had gone down. But there certainly wasn’t any snow.

One of the things that these carols are doing is assimilating the story of the birth of Jesus into our homes, or rather into an idealised version of our homes, because even here in England a white Christmas is, of course, very rare. I think it’s a fairly safe assumption that we won’t have one this year either.

And as well as the carols, the Bible readings that we traditionally use at this time also contain things which look contrary. Isaiah’s wonderful vision of the peaceful life on ‘God’s holy mountain’, after the Rod of Jesse, the Saviour, has beaten the Assyrians, and saved God’s chosen people, isn’t just a pastoral idyll.

It deliberately puts almost impossible companions together. The wolf and the sheep; the leopard, the kid; the calf, the young lion, the cow and the bear - the little child, leading them, like a party of schoolchildren following their teacher around the Tower of London, say.

Or perhaps it’s a classroom, full of these unlikely neighbours, who are not busily eating each other, but they are sitting attentively in class, being kept in good order by a little boy, like my two-year old grandson Jim. In your dreams, Sunshine!

Well, yes; in Isaiah, in Isaiah’s dreams. In the words of the prophet, telling his hearers what God has spoken to him and said, that the Rod of Jesse would come and slay the Assyrians, and then that they ‘would not hurt or destroy on God’s holy mountain.’

Interesting that it is on a mountain, on a high place. The Greek gods were on a mountain too; on Mount Olympus. And in the Old Testament, the heathen gods, the Baals and the Astartes of the Chaldeans, were worshipped with sacred poles, which were ‘in the high places’. ‘High places’ was almost a synonym for where God lived.

We ourselves look up, look up to heaven, because conventionally, God lives in Heaven, and Jesus sits at God's right hand 'on high', we say. Think of our Psalm this evening.

Unto thee I lift up mine eyes:
O thou that dwellest in the heavens. [Ps. 123]

But again, it's not literally true. Yuri Gagarin, the first astronaut, was said by Nikita Krushchev to have gone into space 'but not to have seen God there'. The early astronauts didn't find a man with a white beard sitting on a golden throne and floating above the clouds. John Gillespie Magee's wonderful poem, which is often read at the funeral of a pilot, 'High Flight', comes to mind. 'Oh, I have slipped the surly bonds of earth ... put out my hand and touched the face of God'. And so, on God's holy mountain, children can safely play with cockatrices, vipers, and with asps, cobras. 'Sheep may safely graze'.

It's a much better outlook for the Israelites. The Messiah would come along and free them from slavery. The Rod of Jesse would mete out retribution to all their foes. That's something that we can certainly relate to. 'If only ..', we say. If only: what would you call in the Rod of Jesse to do in your life? But maybe we are too comfortable, too well settled to really empathise with how the Israelites must have felt.

But there are people who are in exile, who are not free, who may even be subjected to slavery, even today, not far away. On Friday I did my first Father Christmas duty of this Christmas, up at Brooklands College, where there is a project for children who are asylum seekers and refugees. I gave out splendid big stockings full of goodies donated by the supporters of the project and by Elmbridge CAN, our local refugee support group, to 26 young people, teenagers and in their early 20s, who had come from Eritrea, from Syria, Ukraine, from Kurdistan, Iraq, from Afghanistan. Some were black Africans, some were Arabs, a couple were Chinese, and a couple were white Europeans. Many do not know whether they will be allowed to stay.

Some were learning to read and write for the first time; although typically, the ones who hadn't been able to read and write were amazingly good at mental arithmetic. They were learning English, of course, and learning how to fit in with English society. The first words that they are taught are 'please', 'thank you', and 'sorry', because none of those are necessarily expressions that you come across in some of the countries that they have come from. Part of Father Christmas' visit was a huge lunch, of Middle Eastern and African delicacies, that one of the volunteers from Elmbridge CAN had made. For about half the children, this would be their only meal that day. One meal, if you're lucky. This is in Weybridge!

So pictures of the Israelites, in exile and under the oppressor's boot, could still in certain circumstances be a picture of contemporary life, for refugees and asylum

seekers today. Think what life in the refugee camps must be like, in Jordan, for example. No snow there, either!

As well as the mythical snow on this fourth Sunday of Advent, just on the eve of Christmas itself, St Matthew tells us the story of the other half of the Annunciation. This isn't about Mary but about Joseph her betrothed. Again, the Christmas story is so familiar that we perhaps gloss over the bits that seem rather unlikely. Joseph's original reaction when he finds out that his wife-to-be is pregnant, although he has had nothing to do with it, is what you might expect. His first thought is that the wedding is not going to happen.

Who is the Angel Gabriel? Have you met any angels recently? Or at all? It seems to depend a bit on where you come from and what you're used to. In Africa and in Southern Europe, people are much more ready to believe in the existence of angels than perhaps we are. I don't think that we can explain the Virgin Birth in the same way that we could explain how to bake a perfect soufflé - or whatever it is they do on the Great British Bake-Off.

But look at it functionally. Jesus definitely lived. He was a human being, although during his life and afterwards, things happened which have led us to believe that he was more than human, that he was divine as well as human. So somehow he must have been born, been conceived. All the things that show that he was really born, that he really was human, just like the other miracles, turning water into wine, miraculously healing sick people, raising Lazarus from the dead - none of those can be explained: so Jesus' conception is equally mysterious and impossible to understand.

But notice how Jesus' earthly parents, wonderfully, accepted the situation; and of course Mary said the Magnificat, which we've just sung together. God has chosen me; God has magnified me; God has made a big thing out of me.

Is it just a pretty story, then? Is it just a convenient excuse to have a nice time at Christmas? Think about what Mary said. Think about the message of the Magnificat, and the message of Isaiah, about the animals on 'God's holy mountain'. 'He has put down the mighty from his seat, and exalted the humble and meek.' Are we the mighty? Or are we the 'humble and meek'?

We need to think about it, and to do something. Perhaps the other thing about God's holy mountain is that a little child shall lead them. Shall we say that that is the Christ Child? You know, in snowy Bethlehem? And another thing. 'No crying he makes'. This is some baby!

Amen.

Hugh Bryant

High Flight

*Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth
And danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings;
Sunward I've climbed, and joined the tumbling mirth
of sun-split clouds, — and done a hundred things
You have not dreamed of — wheeled and soared and swung
High in the sunlit silence. Hov'ring there,
I've chased the shouting wind along, and flung
My eager craft through footless halls of air....*

*Up, up the long, delirious, burning blue
I've topped the wind-swept heights with easy grace.
Where never lark, or even eagle flew —
And, while with silent, lifting mind I've trod
The high untrespassed sanctity of space,
— Put out my hand, and touched the face of God.*

John Gillespie Magee (1922-1941)