

Chichester Cathedral
Midnight Eucharist, 11.00pm, Friday 25 December 2011

One of the many things my family tease me about is that I apparently shed a tear far too easily at moving scenes in films or TV dramas. So being a little sensitive on this point, I'm not going to tell you if I was among the millions (so it is said) to have been reduced to tears by this year's advert for a major department store, featuring a small boy impatiently waiting for Christmas - but not so he can open his own gifts; rather because he's so looking forward to giving a present to his parents. The advert has become a phenomenon, with nearly four million viewers on YouTube, adding to however many have seen it on television. Something about it seems to have touched a chord; perhaps that it's a time of cuts and austerity has something to do with this.

The underlying message of giving rather than receiving does carry echoes of the birth of the Christ-child. But as the action of the advert all takes place within a single home, it doesn't begin to give the full story. Consider that Joseph and a heavily pregnant Mary had to *leave their* home to take part in a compulsory registration ordered by the occupying power of Rome. From the start the birth of Christ was affected by wider political circumstances, as are the lives of everyone on this planet. So, touching as the small boy's generosity is, if we are looking for other contemporary echoes of the Christmas story we need to range further afield. Consider, for example, the protest camp outside St Paul's Cathedral; and then just a week ago the first anniversary of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit and vegetable seller, setting himself alight outside a government office: an event that kick started the so-called Arab Spring that has swept through so many countries in North Africa and the Middle East.

You may be thinking - what have protesters, or Tunisia, got to do with Christmas? Well, let's start with St Paul's Cathedral, where my opposite number, the Canon Chancellor Giles Fraser, resigned his post at the prospect of police dispersing peaceful protesters. He then said something that intrigued me: the magnificent architecture of St Paul's was good at expressing the *grandeur* of God, but not so effective at proclaiming Jesus, born in a stable. At first sight, this might seem an odd remark in the midst of a crisis. But he was saying the Christian response to anything and everything should always be shaped by what the birth of the Christ-child reveals - God involved in and committed to every aspect of our lives. In Christ we learn that God is not too grand to care deeply about each one of us, and the ways we organise our life together, whether locally or nationally.

And to refer back to the advert, Christmas is about God giving us something, or rather someone; someone who grew up to practise what he preached: that self-giving and generosity are central to a better life and a better world. Someone who was himself ready to protest against injustice and greed, and to speak up for those considered of little account.

Which leads me to Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26 year old Tunisian fruit and vegetable seller, supporting eight people on less than a £100 a month. His ambition was to trade up from a wheelbarrow to a pick-up truck. One day three officials asked him for bribes, and when he refused, they confiscated everything. He went to the governor's house to ask for his goods back, but when he was contemptuously refused, something snapped. He poured petrol over himself and lit a match.

Hearing of this, a wave of sympathy and anger swept Tunisia. For once, protesters refused to back down during the ensuing military crackdown. Within weeks the president

had fled the country, and now Bouazizi's face and name are celebrated right across North Africa and the Middle East.

Sometimes it happens that a small local event, apparently insignificant, proves momentous and transformative. A year ago such an event took place in Tunisia. Nearly 2000 years ago another death proved even more influential, when an innocent man was falsely condemned, and yet went to his death asking forgiveness for his persecutors. Before he died he broke bread and shared wine with his friends, as we will do this evening 'in memory of him'. I speak, of course, of the very same Christ whose birth we celebrate this night. At Christmas, God's gift to us is his Son, and at Easter that Son's generosity is overwhelming: there is no greater gift than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.

Christ may have lived and died in circumstances far from the comfort enjoyed by the small boy in the advert. But his life was nonetheless all about abundance - overflowing compassion, hospitality and integrity. We in England live in economically lean and uncertain times. Perhaps some here tonight have lost their jobs this past year, and we are all facing the prospect of years of declining living standards. But from the perspective of the Christ-child and the adult Jesus we see this far from the whole truth. There is no reason why there should be a shortage of love, or imagination, or thankfulness, or giving and self-giving - here, in Tunisia, throughout the world. The message of Christmas is in fact about abundance: the abundant love of God, seen in the face of the Christ-child, inviting us to order our common life fairly, never forgetting the needs of the poorest; inviting us to live abundant lives, whatever our material resources - it doesn't matter if you can't afford to shop in that department store, or are not the protesting sort!

I started out by talking about tears shed at films and even an advert. The Bible doesn't tell us if there was any weeping the night that Christ was born, but there must have been, I think. There's no embarrassment in tears accompanying the arrival of a newborn child, especially a child whose birth reveals the overflowing love and commitment of God. I wish you a very happy Christmas, whatever your circumstances, and I wish you the happiness that comes from abundant life and a generous heart. AMEN