

Chichester Cathedral **Christmas Day 2018, 11.00am Sung Eucharist**

Like many families, I suspect, our Christmas follows a set and fairly traditional pattern; for example in our household no Christmas presents (stockings excepted!) until after the Queen's Speech. And we always find a moment to remember absent friends and family. That brings a poignant note to the Christmas cheer; more poignant still when it includes loved ones who have died and are particularly missed at this time of year.

This note of Christmas remembrance is widened by the famous bidding prayer, by Eric Milner-White, used for the first time one hundred years ago, at the very first nine lessons and carols from King's College Cambridge. 'And particularly at this time,' the bidding prayer invites, 'let us remember the poor, the cold, the hungry, the oppressed; the sick and them that mourn; the lonely and the unloved...'. Milner-White, also included, controversially but understandably given that the First World War had ended that year, a prayer for the dead: 'let us remember all those who rejoice with us, but upon another shore and in a greater light, that multitude which no one can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh...'.

'The poor' come first in Milner-White's prayer, and indeed much of his list is really just an amplification of different forms of poverty. For poverty has to do with a lack, or deficiency: and the lack may take many forms: lack of money, health, a home; lack of peace, friendship, freedom, the presence of loved ones, and more.

Rowan Williams tells of visiting a hospital in Jesus's birthplace, Bethlehem, and of standing over an incubator in a well resourced intensive care ward. Dependent on foreign donations, the ward was a beacon of excellence in an area beset with appalling and long term suffering. The doctor showing Williams around commented, 'the poorest deserve the best'.

Williams reflects on this statement: agreeing that the poor do indeed deserve the best; not because they've earned it, but because their need is greatest. And because where human dignity is most threatened, it is especially important to emphasize it. Furthermore, that the poor deserve the best is a truth at the heart of the Christmas story.

I shall come back a little later to the centrality of poverty, and deficiency, to the meaning Christmas story. But before that I'm going to take what might seem a strange digression. As the year draws to a close, there is a wider societal version of toasting 'absent friends', and remembering those who now rest 'upon another shore and in a greater light.' Think, for example, of that extended section of 'Sports Personality of the Year' where images are displayed of sporting greats who have died during the last twelve months. And in the world of cinema, a hugely influential figure died in November at the age of ninety five – the American comic book writer and editor Stan Lee.

Stan Lee may not be a name everyone here this morning recognises, but he has made a real impact on our culture: and I don't just mean Western culture. For he created the characters at the heart of the most successful series of films of the modern era, right around the world: *Spider-Man*, *the X-Men*, *Iron Man*, *Thor*, *the Hulk*, *Black Panther*, and many more. Lee's cameo performances in every one of the films made for an extraordinary culmination to a career dating back to the 1940s. Frustrated by the dull, two-dimensional, black-and-white comic book characters of the time, Lee instead chose to create more colourful, full-blooded, and flawed characters, beginning with the *Fantastic Four* and *Spider-Man*.

Spider-Man, who has even been known to attend Chichester Crib Services in full costume, is the perfect example of the Stan Lee approach. His powers make him a kind of god among ordinary human beings, but very much a god with feet of clay. Peter Parker is a teenager who gains the power to swing between buildings, as well as extraordinary strength and agility, but still has to deal with acne, financial issues, rejection, a sense of inadequacy, loneliness and bungled attempts at romance.

Lee had hit on a formula that fans loved: heroes with dark sides and doubts who would have to learn from their mistakes. Saving the world was never simple, and involved coming to terms with human foibles and weaknesses. And this morning Lee's storytelling can help us better understand the Christmas story, by throwing into relief the way *God* comes to the rescue of the beleaguered human race.

In our Gospel reading this morning, we heard stirring words from the prologue to John's Gospel: 'And the word became flesh and lived among us'. The American theologian and author Eugene Peterson, who died a month before Stan Lee, is probably best known for his book *The Message: The Bible in contemporary language*. His paraphrase of that verse from John's Gospel goes like this: 'The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.' To save humanity, God would have to become one of us, would have to get his hands dirty, and engage with our foibles and weaknesses.

But while Lee gave us god-like heroes with feet of clay, at Christmas God gives us a thoroughly human baby who is also fully divine. A baby who will grow up to show us what true humanity is like, and what it means to live what he called 'life in all its fullness'. But his beginnings and indeed his end are humble and difficult. He was born into a society characterised by fear and oppression, ruled by a foreign power. He narrowly escaped death as a baby, and his family were forced to flee their home, becoming refugees. Nonetheless, in the adult Jesus we find someone who speaks of hope in the face of despair, forgiveness in the face of hatred, of life in the face of death. And in these and other ways he shows us how the world may be saved.

The key issue of poverty, lack and deficiency is way beyond the powers of the flawed heroes who populate the Stan Lee universe. For part of the message of Christmas is that the poor are not 'other people', but all of us. We were all born to glory, to the dignity of being God's children, free and loving and joyful, but we have

squandered this inheritance. We have been caught up in a human story reproducing patterns of fear and division that all too often result in violence, whether that is in contemporary Bethlehem, on the big screen, or in Brexit divided Britain.

Fortunately for us, in God's eyes we, all of us, are the poor who deserve the best. And God has given us the best, in Jesus Christ. As the opening choir piece in this year's Cathedral carol services expressed it: 'We were heirs to endless woes/Till God the Lord did interpose/ And so a promise soon did run/That he would redeem us by His Son.'

But this gift of His Son was not well received by the majority. As John's Gospel puts it, 'He was in the world... yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.' His life was a light shining in the darkness.

So why was the gift of the Christ child not better received? Well, in a world dominated by a fear and division, a life shining with love and hope can seem strange and threatening. That this is so, is brilliantly expressed in the novel that won this year's Booker Prize: *Milkman*, by Anna Burns. In the midst of her depiction of an unnamed city, where everyday life is poisoned by sectarianism and violence, Burns writes this:

'Take a whole group of individuals... maybe a whole community, a whole nation... conditioned... through years of personal and communal suffering, personal and communal history... overladen with heaviness and grief and fear and anger – well, these people could not, not at the drop of a hat, be open to any bright shining button of a person stepping into their environment and shining upon them just like that.'

Well, Jesus was and is that 'bright shining button of a person' who makes a transformative difference in the world, for all that it costs him dearly. Now outside of our imaginations, none of us are ever going to be *Spider-Man* or indeed *Spider-Woman*. But we can, if we dare, become like Jesus, living lives worthy of the God who created us, playing our part in responding to the many different forms of poverty in our world; for yes, we were born to glory, to the dignity of being God's children, free and loving and joyful and compassionate. This is a hope and a destiny far weightier than any superhero could hope for. For whatever form of poverty and deficiency has shaped us, our lives can shine with the light of Christ, to the glory of God and for the sake of God's world.

I wish you a joyful, peaceful and very happy Christmas. AMEN.

Canon Dr Anthony Cane, *Chancellor*