

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL

ADVENT 4 2019 CATHEDRAL EUCHARIST

'Messy time Christmas!'. I was greeted with those words by an elderly parishioner as I delivered our annual parish Christmas card on a cold, wet afternoon in County Durham. That was not the response I had expected, though I seem to recall on a pastoral visit in the summer the same lady describing roses not as symbols of love but as untidy flowers. Sadly, for various reasons she did not exactly have a very positive view about life. To that house-proud lady Christmas was clearly a nuisance, a disturbance when the young around her made a mess. Cards rather than bringing pleasure got in the way of dusting, unwrapping presents brought their own chaos. Her greeting did not exactly lift my spirits on that wintry afternoon and yet I have never forgotten her response.

On reflection although my parishioner did not realise it, she may not have been totally misguided. In fact 'messy' has become quite a respectable adjective in church circles. Driving through the Hampshire countryside last Wednesday afternoon to my youngest granddaughter's Nativity Play I noticed a large notice outside a village church inviting people to attend a messy Crib Service. One of the joys or, if you trying to learn it, frustrations of the English language, is that we often give a single word different meanings. Book the volume as a verb becomes to make a reservation. The concise Oxford Dictionary defines the word 'messy' as meaning untidy, dirty but also confused, difficult to deal with. Christmas celebrations often involve a relaxing of the standards of basic tidiness in many homes and that is just great. There is much confusion in modern Britain when it comes to Christmas.

We might begin with the timing of the festival. The traditional festival 12 days from 25th December has been replaced with a period of celebration from roughly the beginning of December which ends for many on New Year's Day. Trying to define the Christmas season is a messy business. The Advent period of material and spiritual preparation is intertwined with parties and carol services. If that magnificent Christmas tree dominating the cathedral from the top of the Arundel Screen could speak, it might ask why for the last three weeks are its lights turned on for some services and but not for the regular round of daily worship. The answer is that the Dean and Chapter wish to welcome schools, colleges and other organisations when it is convenient for them to celebrate our Lord's birth and so hopefully to witness to God's amazing love in Christ, whilst at the same time with purple vestments, Advent music and an unlit tree help us prepare for Jesus' birth and Christ's Second Coming in judgement. In a way that 50 years ago would not have been the case in December the cathedral and the wider church worship holds in tension that which celebrates the Saviour's birth whilst other services focus on solemnly preparing us for that birthday celebration. If we do not like the term messy, the modern Christmas celebration is at least a muddle.

Today, the fourth Sunday of Advent is then our last opportunity to step back and engage once more with our spiritual preparation. As we have lit the Advent candles week by week we have been invited to contemplate how God engaged with His people to bring salvation and the promise of life in all its fullness. The candles represent the Patriarchs, the OT prophets with their call for national repentance and last week John the Baptist, whose specific task was to prepare the way of THE Lord. Today the Prayer over the candle would focus our thoughts on the Virgin Mary – she who was called to be the mother of our Lord. We heard the words of promise in Isaiah that as Judah faced invasion a young woman would conceive a son and that before he was very old the threat would have disappeared, a text which early Christians with St. Matthew saw as pointing to God's action in and through the Virgin Mary. Mary's part in God's plan of salvation is the intended theme for this Sunday and yet in the Gospel Matthew's account of the birth of our Lord seems to concentrate on Joseph. Our Lord's birth is told through his eyes.

If ever a man found himself in a messy situation, not a little confused that man was Joseph. As Matthew in a few verses described the circumstances of Jesus' conception and birth there can be few men who would not share Joseph's all too human doubts about his fiancée's pregnancy. In today's society where divorce is common-place we can understand why Joseph's initial reaction was to bring the legally binding engagement to an end through judicial process. Described as a righteous man, however, he did not want a public scandal. His mind was changed when the angel, the messenger of God comes to him in a dream. In our knowledge driven world we can all too easily get hung up on angels and dreams. I think today we would rather think of Joseph being moved in prayer by the Holy Spirit, of his having an inner conviction of God's purpose for him, what he must do, the risks he must take. Matthew and Joseph used the conventions of their time to describe encounters with the living God. What matters is the faith and love of Joseph in taking Mary as his wife, his becoming the guardian of the Lord's anointed one.

Matthew is not telling this story for its own sake, as a bit of local gossip. He is making a serious theological point. This passage with which his Gospel begins describes the circumstances of the birth, not of any child but of He who is named Jesus, the Saviour, the one who in the words of Isaiah is Emmanuel – 'God with us'. This is Matthew's way of saying of Jesus with St. John, 'the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'. Jesus is both Son of David and Son of God . The obedience of Mary and the trust in God's purposes of Joseph are at the heart of the Christmas event but central is Jesus in whom God's love is made flesh, God incarnate. Out of the mess, and confusion in this child God's light shines.

In any biography the subject's birth is only significant because of what that person did in their life. For Jesus, St. Paul expresses that in the passage we heard from the Letter to the Romans as he presents his credentials to proclaim 'the gospel concerning His Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be

the Son of God..... by resurrection from the dead Jesus Christ our Lord'.

Human life is messy, confusing as we look across the world this morning, at our own nation and perhaps at our own personal circumstances. In all this our hope rests that in Christ God is with us. He shares in what we experience. We must not let the pressures of time or finance which Christmas can create cloud our minds to the true significance of the one whose birth we celebrate, the one whose presence we realise in the word proclaimed and sacrament shared in this our Advent Eucharist as we look forward to His coming in glory.

Sermon by the Rt Revd Dr Alan Chesters, Bishop