

St Giles, Horsted Keynes

CHRISTMAS DAY 2024

Fr David's Sermon

I wonder how you have all been preparing for Christmas? Or even anticipating it. For in the Church Year Christmas starts not in October with the shops, not even on 1st December or Advent, but today! Christmas Day! I don't entirely go along with those Christians who condemn the commercialization of Christmas: the spending too much, the eating and drinking too much. To celebrate with family and friends, to exchange gifts and cards, above all to share good will and even love, all these things need preparation. At the same time there can be pressure on families to spend more they can afford, pressure because they cannot afford to celebrate in the way they see others celebrating. Pressure on our time and energy. Children who are both excited and tired. Pressure of mixing with difficult family members, or greatly missing ones with whom we shared previous Christmases. Pressure of illness or sadness or homelessness, when everyone else seems to be having a great time. Pressure on roads, railways, ferries and airports.

The fact that you are here in church this morning suggests that you are seeking what Christians see as the true meaning at the heart of Christmas. Let's reflect for a few minutes on the Gospel we just heard. Luke starts the well-known story with emperors and governors, 'who are, after all, the people who make history, aren't they?' * Augustus lifts a finger and the whole region is on the move, just because he says so. We're all too familiar with how that works in Russia/Ukraine, Israel/Palestine and other places too. But then Luke switches to a very different kind of history. Joseph, with his pregnant wife, Mary, is caught up with so many 'ordinary, insignificant' people in these journeys. Making a very difficult journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And then comes the birth of a baby. Born 'off stage, shoved into a corner'. * And yet Isaiah had foretold a change from darkness to light, a child who would have authority, which would lead to peace, justice and righteousness. Luke tells of an angel telling shepherds that this child would bring news of great joy for everyone: glory to God and peace on earth. Shepherds were despised by the religious leaders of the time, because their occupation made them neglect their religious duties.

Here, history is being turned on its head. Yes, the decisions of the rich and powerful affect the lives of ordinary people. But we are invited to reflect on how we understand momentous events. In the birth of Jesus, corners and insignificant places and people take on new meaning. God is changing things in a different way. Not through the powerful, wealthy and famous, but by drawing us back to the real meaning of our existence in a strange way. 'He comes to live with us, as one of us, in utter humility. He is born in fragility and danger, as a human baby, with no wealth or privilege to protect him. His divine glory hidden, so that Jesus can be what we are – but so often refuse to be – fully human, dependent upon God the Father.* This can be the source of new life, if only we are humble enough to accept it. Our nourishment lies in the animal trough. This is the bread of life, the body of Christ we are invited to receive in every Eucharist.

Seemingly ordinary people like you and me are of infinite value to God. We cannot do much to bring about peace and justice. Yet, after the shepherds had visited Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus, we are told that they 'returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen'. *Luke 2. 20*

Can we do the same, in worship and in how we live our lives?

Amen.

*Quotations from Jane Williams, *Lectionary Reflections*, SPCK, 2011, pages 12 & 13.