

Wilton Carol Service 2022

Do know what, when I wrote my little homily for last year's Christmas Carol service here in Wilton, I remember thinking, 'well if the vicar invites me back to do this next year, at least it will have been a better year, with a bit less gloom to have to deal with in the sermon!'

Oh dear. We gather for Christmas this year, I think, in a better place nationally in terms of Covid, but in a world where we are even more aware than we probably were last year that there are people living in our communities, and indeed this may be true of some of you here, where people are having to make daily real life decisions about whether to turn the heating on or to eat. And where more and more refugees and migrants arrive on our shores, people who are compelled to squeeze into flimsy inflatable boats in the depths of winter and risk the darkness and the cold of the channel. And where since the beginning of this month I think there have been three days on which no sector of our society has been on strike. And that is before we cast our gaze towards Ukraine, or the many other places I could list.

Now, you've come here for a Carol service, and not for a political speech, and you're not going to get a political speech. And indeed I was very tempted to simply preach on the John Lewis Christmas advert again this year. But I think we do arrive at this Christmas even more acutely aware of the brittleness, the fragility, the exhaustion, and the cruelty of our world. And it seems to me that we do need to try to do something with that.

And then the King chose Malcolm Guite's sonnet, *Refugee*, to be read at the Royal Carol service this year. You just heard it, because we substituted it at the last minute for the poem listed in the order of service. And it is quite extraordinary. Guite, an Anglican priest and poet, reminds us, at Christmas, that Jesus doesn't stay here, in the crib. Just shortly after his own birth, he

became refugee, fleeing in the arms of his parents because of persecution. As we heard, "for even as we sing our final carol his family is up and on that road, fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel, glancing behind and shouldering their load."

And it is an extraordinary moving poem, and it says something quite encouraging, I think, about our new King and his priorities. But, at the risk of treason, I actually don't think the King has discovered anything particularly new. We heard the choir sing Richard Shepard's *Song of Mary* just now. Words pretty much lifted directly from the gospel of St Luke, and they are all about God's love for, concern for, and attention to, the poor, the hungry, the meek.

And here is the good news of Christmas: God is where you are. God is where we are. Where all of us are. And that means God doesn't have to be persuaded to come and help the poor, the hungry, the meek, the refugee, the cold, the isolated, the hopeless, the lonely. Whatever else we are doing here tonight, we are not trying to persuade God to notice. God already noticed. God is already here. Born into the squalor of a borrowed stable, his formative memories those of displacement and persecution. "Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled." So we too carry Christ, and in our darkness, or the darkness of those we love, or those we hardly know, his fingers are tightly curled around ours.

What we are doing here tonight is reminding ourselves that God is already here. The *promise and the glory* of Christmas is that we are never alone. The *work* of Christmas, for us, is to decide whether or not we want to be part of what God is doing. Joining in, to resist the creep of the darkness, to bring the light a little closer. So actually it turns out I am just preaching the John Lewis Christmas advert. It is about noticing. It is about kindness. We just need to join in, and learn to skate. Amen.