

Midnight Eucharist: St Andrew's, Corbridge Christmas Eve 2018

God of glory, you have pierced the silence of this night by the songs of angels. Speak to our hearts the word of grace and truth that we behold in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Our Christmas Gospel reading presents us with two evocative scenes. The first is the brilliant, dazzling light on the Bethlehem hills, the vision of the multitude of the heavenly host singing strange yet exhilarating, wondrous, glorious heavenly songs, transforming utter fear into heart-stopping joy. Glory, brilliance, beauty, ecstasy, piercing holiness.

The second is the utterly shocking, disturbing scene of a baby being born in a cattle-shed, a young mother, far from home and family, in the searing pain of child-birth, laid in an improvised cradle fit only for the feeding of animals. Poverty, dirt, smell, darkness, cold, fear.

Where would you *rather* be? Would you chose to be on the Bethlehem hills to see the celestial fireworks, to experience the fear that nevertheless gives us such a high, and to have that fear transformed by joy?

Or would you rather be in the stable, or as tradition tells us, the cave, where the sound is not the angels, but the mother in labour, the crying new-born babe? The screaming instead of the songs; darkness instead of light, nothing for our comfort, except perhaps the fragile gift of new life? Which would you chose?

Or, to ask another question, where are you *now* in your own life? The Service of Nine Lessons and Carols held earlier this evening bids us to go in heart and mind even to Bethlehem. It may be that we have come to Church tonight full of wonder and joy, embracing the song of the angels, seeing the light that banishes darkness. We may feel ourselves to be on the Bethlehem hills, in the midst of all the glory and radiance.

Or, it may be that you have come carrying the burdens you bear; so aware of what you have lost, of what causes you pain – the things that Christmas time can so easily re-ignite. So we identify with the stable – yes, there is wonder, the mystery of human birth, in whatever the circumstances always does, but it is far from comfortable. For Mary and Joseph it was in some ways a crisis. Perhaps we feel ourselves to be in the stable.

And then a third question. Which scene do you *need* to see tonight? For sometimes in our journey of faith, we need to see the glory, to hear the angels, even to experience holy fear. We need to be caught up in wonder, love and praise; to see and experience the transcendent, the numinous, the God who is far above and beyond our mortality.

And sometimes we need to see God in the ordinary, the humble, the mess, the dirt, the plans gone hopelessly wrong. Or to see God when we feel let down, when we find no room for us in the inn. When we feel frightened because we feel so vulnerable, when we feel the pain. When we cannot make sense of why God should allow things to happen like this. When it all seems crazy or even cruel.

So tonight, we consider two scenes: the Bethlehem hills, the stable.

Where would you rather be tonight? Where are you tonight in your own life? What do you need to see tonight?

Tonight, I can only share with you where I would like to be and need to be. I have many memories of the angels, the times when spiritually I have been on the hills and I have seen the radiance, felt the holy fear, known the joy, experienced the ecstasy.

But for me, in God's world to which he sent his Son, this year has been a year of faces. The faces of Syrian and Yemeni children caught up in war and the consequent humanitarian crisis that leads to hollow eyes staring pitifully from our television screens. The combative and sometimes numbingly arrogant faces of some politicians, here and across the world, becoming ever more polarised and loud and brash, as if government has forgotten the priority of selfless service and the common good. And faces that I see in our towns and cities, faces which I sense have simply lost hope or any positive purpose in living.

Which is why tonight I must be in the stable, for I must see again the face of Jesus Christ, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, the love of God in the face of Jesus Christ. I must be where I can see in his face what I am called to be, what the human race is called to be, and what I trust one day, through him, we will be.

The night is dark, the stable draughty and cold, we are with the poor beasts. Mary is a young mother far from home; Joseph feels the overwhelming sense of responsibility and care. Yes, there are stories of radiance on the hills, glorious songs, peace and goodwill. But for me, I must simply behold the face, the face of the child of Bethlehem – the human face of God, the beauty and love of God in the face of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.