

WATCHNIGHT SERVICE

Thursday 24 December 2009, Killean & Kilchenzie

Christmas Eve

preacher: Rev Martin Grashoff

hymns: Church Hymnary. Fourth Edition (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2005)

Welcome & Intimations

Opening Hymn : 'On Christmas night all Christians sing' (CH 294)

Opening Prayer

We praise you, O God,
for this night you are giving us Jesus.
He is our brother,
bone of our bones, flesh of our flesh.
He is born into this world,
as we are all born.
He carries the joy and the sadness,
the success, the failure and the guilt,
which is part of all human life –
and he does so even more
than we ever do.

We praise you, O God,
for being present in this baby in a byre,
for travelling with us throughout our lives,
for carrying our burden with us.
Tonight is a night of light,
and joy and new life.
We praise you, O God.
Amen.

Prophet Reading : Isaiah 9:2-6 (*New Revised Standard Version*)

Hymn : 'O little town of Bethlehem' (CH 304)

Gospel Reading : Luke 2:1-20 (*New Revised Standard Version*)

Hymn : 'While humble shepherds watched their flocks' (CH 296)

Address

For a very brief moment I was tempted to start this address with a Christmas song written by a Belgian comedian thirty odd years ago.¹ It makes fun with a lot of

¹ Urbanus, 'Bakske vol met stro', 1979.
(*Chorus line:*)

(*Translation:*)

nonsense people have woven around Christmas. But because it ends with baby Jesus dashing away in a Ferrari, I thought it would be a bit too much for tonight. I'll have to sing it some other time.

The reason why I thought of this cheeky parody was honest. We *do* weave a lot of nonsense around Christmas. Jesus and Joseph and Mary often become an unearthly holy family, which does not help God to enter our reality. Quite a few Christmas tales and dogmas tend to make the actual story incomprehensible, if not straightforwardly ridiculous.

But the single and central issue of Christmas is about God entering reality. That issue is exactly the same today as it was two thousand, or three thousand, years ago. Because the simple answer to this is: it cannot be. *God above, men below*² – that is how things are, and we should not mess that up. So, where or how to find God? We are down on earth.

The essential thing is that any experience of God, and any attempt to worship, is a fundamental mystery. A mystery is not a riddle to be solved, but a question that should remain a question. Mysteries are about awe and wonderment.

That is why stories like the Christmas story need to be handled with great care. As soon as we try to make it comprehensible, or take it literal, the mystery falters. Instead we should listen to these stories as children, open to the unexpected and not defiant of the wonder.

As a former nurse I know that a virgin birth is just nonsense. As a believer I was touched by the sheer miracle of any birth I witnessed. And I am especially touched by the wonderment of this particular story about a Jewish girl taking life as it comes and giving birth to... Yes, to what?

Let us be careful to fill it in. For words can easily hide or shatter the mystery. It was a cosmologist who wrote recently that his scientific research into the universe basically filled him with wonderment. Perhaps we should indeed become better star gazers to see beyond the 'incandescent ball of gas'. Perhaps we should, like the prophets, take some training in 'enhanced viewing'.

This earth is this earth. That's all we have. But can molecules and genes and laws of nature comfort us? Or help us to find our particular way through life? Or reveal the essence of love and peace? It's all about this earth, but there is more than only earth. Now sssh! Listen and look for the mystery.

Happy Christmas time!

Hymn : 'O come all ye faithful' (CH 306:1-3)

Jezeke is geboren, aleluja halloo

Sweet wee Jesus is born, alleluia hello,

Jezeke is geboren in een bakske vol met stro

Sweet wee Jesus is born in a basket full of straw

² The chorus line from Sydney Carter's song 'Every star shall sing a carol'.

Bell ringing at midnight

Hymn : 'O come all ye faithful' (CH 306:4)

Closing Prayer

Now let the light of this Christmas
accompany us in the year to come.
May it help us through dark days,
may it comfort us in whatever we have to face,
may it lead the way for us wherever we go.

Make us light-bearers, O God,
so we can share our light
and spread your light
to those who struggle with life,
to those who are all alone,
to those who need your healing presence.

And when our means are short,
when we fail to bear your light,
we still ask you to come to this world
and grant your mercy and comfort.
Through Jesus Christ,
born in our midst,
born from up high,
born unto us.
Amen.

Closing Hymn : 'Hark! the herald angels sing' (CH 301)

Blessing