

Peel Cathedral, 27th December 2020 Holy Innocents

Readings: Jeremiah 31: 15-17; Matthew 2: 13-18

For most of us I suspect this Christmas has been different. Even here on the Island where we are able to do so much more than people in other parts of the world, many of us are not able to be with family members as we had hoped to be.

At the beginning of this week I heard of one returning student who was really struggling with the opportunities here of gathering in large crowds. At a nativity service they felt panic at being in such a big group, with no-one wearing a mask. And for them, the final urge to go out in joy felt totally inappropriate.

Every year Christmas brings a huge range of emotions. There's the excitement of children as Christmas approaches, with the "He's been!" exclamation all too early on Christmas morning. There's the joy of being with family and friends. There's the sensation of juggling as all the parts of the Christmas dinner are placed on the table. There's the delight of giving and receiving presents. For many, there's the opportunity to worship and sing carols. There's the satisfaction of relaxing after the meal. But there can be low points too – there's the exhaustion felt by many parents as they've finalised all the preparations, food under- or over-cooked, sharp words spoken, people that are missing from our table, challenging international news.

As we look back over the different elements of the Christmas story, we can empathise with many of the emotions experienced by the key players:

Mary, whose life was turned upside down by her agreement to become the mother of the Messiah.

Joseph, whose love and trust in his fiancé was tested so sorely.

Mary's family who suffered the shame of a daughter falling pregnant outside marriage.

The Inn-keeper who, on the busiest night of his life, made room in the stable for Joseph and Mary.

The shepherds whose daily lives were interrupted by an extraordinary visitation and invitation to go and find the Christ child.

The magi whose professional knowledge and desire for truth caused them to leave all that was familiar and journey into the unknown, following a star.

Next week we will be celebrating Epiphany, looking at the journey the Magi made to Bethlehem. Today the storyline seems slightly out of kilter because we're looking at what happened after the Magi left. You may remember that they had followed the star, looking for a new-born king. But they took their eyes off the star as they approached Jerusalem, assuming the prince would be born in a palace.

Once King Herod heard of their mission he was determined to root out any competition for his family's place in society. When his obsequiousness didn't result in the wise men letting him know where they had found the child, he sent in the troops.

It's impossible for me to even imagine the anguish caused by the killing of all the young boys in Bethlehem and its surroundings. It was completely unexpected, sudden, brutal. Everyone would have been affected. One of my earliest memories of such a tragedy was in 1966 in the village of Abafan in Wales. 116 children (and 28 adults) were killed when a spoil heap from a nearby coal mine slipped down the hillside and engulfed the local primary school. And, more personally, when

my brother's son died a cot death aged 11 months, and 30 years later when his granddaughter died from sepsis aged 14 months.

And you too will have your own memories and experiences. And questions.

Who is to blame when bad things happen? In the case of Abafan, the tribunal found the blame for the disaster rested upon the National Coal Board. But the NCB as an organisation was not prosecuted, and no NCB staff were demoted, sacked or prosecuted as a consequence of the Aberfan disaster or for evidence given to the inquiry¹. In the case of sepsis, the hospital hadn't followed the updated guidance, but Mia may still have died.

There is no-one to blame for a cot death. So some people wonder if such things are somehow God's punishment. When Jesus was asked what sins the people who'd died when a tower fell on them had committed, he responded with a question: *Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no!* But he used the question as an opportunity to help his listeners think about their own lives when he continued: *But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*²

Today we remember the Holy Innocents as we reflect on those children who died in Bethlehem. The idea of innocence refers to children's simplicity, their lack of knowledge, and their purity not yet spoiled by mundane affairs. And these children, like Mia, never had a chance to enjoy childhood – and bring joy to their families.

Here in Europe, relatively few children die today. But in other parts of the world it's a different story. In 2019 7.4 million children under 14 years old died, mostly of preventable or treatable diseases. All that is needed is access to simple, affordable interventions including immunization, adequate nutrition, safe water and food and quality care by a trained health provider when needed. And the huge improvements that have happened over the last 30 years are continuing as countries across the world seek to meet the Sustainable Development Goals, drawn up through the United Nations.

As we wrestle with tragedies and difficulties in our own lives, those of friends and families, and those of strangers, perhaps the following ideas may help.

- Through Jesus' own suffering God knows and understands our individual situations. In the poem *Footsteps in the Sands*, the poet asks the Lord: *Why during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life, there was only one set of footprints. I don't understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me.* And Jesus whispers his response: *"My precious child, I love you and will never leave you. Never, ever, during your trials and testings. When you saw only one set of footprints, it was then that I carried you."*³
- Sometimes tragedy can lead to positive action. Many charities have been set up in memory of a child, seeking to support other families facing similar illness or challenges. When Georgia was murdered in 2013 her family took a lot of comfort from what people said and the fund set up to buy a memorial bench developed into a trust that is used to enable young people in her area to access enrichment activities.⁴

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aberfan_disaster#cite_note-FOOTNOTEMcLean2007-124

² Luke 13: 4-5

³ <https://www.onlythebible.com/Poems/Footprints-in-the-Sand-Poem.html>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-23604552>

- Giving thanks that we have the internet to provide visual and audio links with family and friends when we are unable to travel to see them in person.

As we grapple with the difficult and even tragic things in our own lives, let's go back to those involved that first Christmas and ask questions for ourselves:

- Are we listening for God's voice? And if we receive a nudge in a new direction, are we ready to embark on an adventure into the unknown, like Mary?
- Have we been let down by those we love and trust, like Joseph was? Are we willing to revisit that pain and consider whether there are other ways of interpreting what we think of as facts?
- Have we suffered shame like Mary's parents? If so, how could we reach out to those who have caused us that sense of shame?
- Are our lives so busy, like the Inn keeper, that we are missing opportunities of providing for those in need? If so, how could we build some more space into our schedule so that we can respond?
- We may not have had an extraordinary visitation like the shepherds, but we are all still invited to meet the Christ child. Will you accept the invitation?
- Are we, like the wise men, prepared to set out on a journey into the unknown? If so, what for us is the star for us to follow?
- Could we be like King Herod, determined to feather our own nest, whatever the consequences for others? If so, I'd encourage you to change your minds, to be content with who you are and what you have. To seek to do good rather than cause such anguish in people's lives.
- Are we, like the mothers in Bethlehem, mourning the death of a child or facing other very difficult situations? If so, are we able to look back over our shoulder, see the set of footprints in the sand and begin to relax into the arms of the Saviour who is carrying us?

In a few moments we have the opportunity of sharing the Eucharist. As we give thanks for the bread and wine, we remember that Jesus gave all of himself for us. Let us draw comfort and strength from His body and His blood.

Amen

Rosemary Clarke