

## Jesus College Oxford Carol Service 5.30pm Sunday 29.xi.2015

In nomine...

We all want a spot of reassurance from time to time. “Is my essay OK?” “Did I really sing that solo OK?” “Tell me, did I look stupid when I...?” Likewise: “Please tell me that, last night, I didn’t...”. You can fill in the gaps yourselves... Then there’s the great philosophical question: “Does my bum look big in this?”

We like the reassuring things in life, the reassuring word, the familiar scene. And I think that’s one of the reasons why we like Christmas. Reassuring because it’s familiar. Cosy. Reminds us of an idyllic past. We know the songs. We can drink lots of mulled wine and eat plentiful mince pies without making excuses. We can wear daft jumpers. We can sit for hours in front of the TV watching inane shows. Our creativity comes out in the kitsch. We can look forward to chestnuts roasting over an open fire (except not in a college room, obviously). We can tramp through the snow to go sledging. All very reassuring images. England is as it should be. Everything’s OK with the world. Happy holidays all round.

Except, except... it’s just not that simple, is it? Who are we trying to delude? Brussels right now makes us think more of armies and terrorists than maligned Christmas vegetables. There are more people mourning loved ones in Paris than Christmas trees in Oxford. There are more refugees homeless and hopeless in Europe than all the people we know put together. Many more will be fierce or fearful this Christmas than idyllically cosily pulling crackers or carolling. There’s no real reassurance in the news, no real reassurance in our experiences, and no reassurance whatsoever in the denial of the disjunction

between traditional mythical visions of Christmas and contemporary lived versions of it. Suffering doesn't stop for Christmas.

Well, that's a bit bleak, isn't it? You come to Chapel to the Carol Service thinking it's all going to be fun. That I'll reel out some rhymes. Or jokes, sometimes. Or Dr Who, as I traditionally do... But instead I say - look first and foremost for reality, not reassurance.

I can't give you the kind of reassurance you might want – about your prospects, your partner, or your unstoppable abilities on the river or the dance floor or in the seminar. But what I can give you is reassurance that (a) you are having real human experiences and that's completely normal and (b) all shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well (to quote a thirteenth century mystic called Julian of Norwich from what everyone thought was going to be her deathbed).

Real reassurance can only be found in the truth. If I say to you, "we're all going to have perfect Christmases", I would be lying. Some of you may have families that have split up. Some of you may be doing Christmas for the first time since a loved one died. No reassurance to be found there. But reassurance to hear that in fact that's normal, lived, human experience. It would be very odd if we all had perfect lives all the time. If I see a wedding couple, or I do a funeral visit, where they say "we never argue" or "we never had an angry word" I'm more worried than if they say "well, sometimes life is good, and sometimes it's challenging", or something along those lines. Because mixing up the good and bad, the fun and the fearsome, is normal, regular, human experience. And that is the real reassurance I can give you.

That's related to the other reassurance I can truly give you, that "all shall be well, all shall be well, all manner of thing shall be well". Because God in Jesus lived a human life too. He knew for himself that mix of good and bad, fun and fear: he dwelled deeply in normal, regular, human experience. So he can give us that deep reassurance that we are being entirely human - both when life is good and when life is messy, both when our Christmases are perfect and when they are not-so-perfect. And when Jesus the Christ child shows us about dwelling deeply in humanity - in the manger, in the hay, in the stable, in the mess, in the utter weirdness (let's face it) of the nativity story - then he also shows us about dwelling deeply in God.

From one thirteenth century mystic to another... St. Francis of Assisi was the inventor of the nativity play. In the tiny village of Greccio, just outside Rome, in 1223, he called together local people bringing animals, hay, and manger, to a cave in a cliff. Into this scene he brought a young couple with a newborn baby. He wanted to reflect on and relive the historical, concrete, human dimensions of the life of Christ. He wanted to make it possible to enter into the place and into the mystery. Francis' biographer wrote, "There simplicity is given a place of honour, poverty is exalted, humility is commended, and out of Greccio is made a new Bethlehem." Not quite like our nativity plays in infant schools these days where it's more likely to be a retelling of Hansel and Gretel with presents at the end. Not quite like the Christmas episodes of Downton Abbey, or Call the Midwife, or ... The Abominable Bride (that's the Sherlock Special) or Fungus the Bogeyman or... Dr Who.

No. The first "nativity play" was not a Christmas show but a Christmas show-stopper. Not a sing-a-long but a scene of simplicity. A radically real reassurance. About dwelling deep in our human existence. And about the God

who dwelled so deeply with us in our humanity that he enables us to dwell deeply with him beyond our humanity, and in eternity. All shall be well, all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well. Reality at Christmas tells us that sometimes there are no quick fixes. But reality at Christmas also tells us that there are eternal fixes. Fixes beyond our fathoming.

Real reassurance lies in the cheap mucky hay which was the only mattress for this unwashed child. Real reassurance lies in the improbable gathering of young unmarried couple, cattle, kings, and shepherds. Real reassurance lies in the utter unexpectedness of it all. Real reassurance lies not in God doing a showy sudden act of salvation but a humble yet heart-stopping entrance into humanity. The miracle is twofold: the shocking entry of God in this scene, and the shocking possibility that we in turn may enter this scene. Like at St. Francis' first nativity scene, the reassurance of reality is our Christmas gift. A reassurance that we're living life deeply and truly. And the reassurance that God is living life with us, dwelling deeply in our most gory humanity as well as our most glorious moments. That there's always a bigger perspective out there: a perspective that goes beyond the living room at Christmas with the curtains drawn to a perspective which embraces all our lives and still more - beyond our internet searches, beyond our jet-setting, beyond our e-worlds or i-worlds and even beyond our expectation and imagination. By the Incarnation, the Christmas story of the birth of God as the human child Jesus, we can be drawn into that bigger perspective that offers the truest of reassurances.

Faith offers not a quick-fix solution, but a life-choice. The reassurance of life in all its fullness. Christmas is about the beginning of a life, a special life, a divine life. God knows how to "get a life": he got a life in Jesus. Thanks to that, thanks to Jesus, we can "get a life" too.