

## Sermon Christmas Day 2017

How lovely to welcome you all here on this beautiful Christmas morning. And how lovely that you have chosen to share this time with us. I hope that at least some of you will have the joy and pleasure of opening a few small gifts today. Even though it's quite common now for lots of children - and even some adults - to make a *list* of what they would like for Christmas, I hope that most of you here will at least receive a few small *surprises*, a few things you didn't expect, something that wasn't on the list. The best gifts, after all, are the ones with a surprise attached!

What Christians celebrate at Christmas is God's great surprise to human kind; the gift *we* didn't quite expect. Though there *had* been a long history of waiting and anticipation, of hope and expectancy that God *would* decisively and finally intervene in human affairs, the *way* in which it at last happened *was* completely unexpected. We all love surprises! But what Christians celebrate at Christmas is the God who breaks into our world and reveals Godself to us in a way we could never have imagined or expected, in a way that would never have appeared on any wish list, no matter how precise or detailed.

So many aspects of that surprise we see even in the very familiar and well known and well-loved stories at the heart of our celebration. In almost all the details, the gospel writers highlight the unexpected way - the surprising way - God shows himself to us in Jesus. It is surprising - unexpected - that the long hoped-for Messiah should be born away from home, away from any comfort, born in obscurity, born to a poor mother and an uncertain step father, born in a remote part of an insignificant corner of the Roman Empire. It is remarkable - unexpected - that the first to receive the Good News of the birth of the Saviour are a bunch of outsiders, of rag-tag, smelly, petty criminals also known shepherds! This is not the way we might expect God to reveal the most important thing to have ever happened in the history of this planet! Even in some of the seemingly insignificant details something of the surprise of this holy birth is communicated to us. Even in details so innocuous and uninteresting as the swaddling clothes and the manger.

In the story so well known to us we hear how the shepherds will identify the Saviour by two signs: that he will be wrapped in swaddling clothes and that he will be laying in a manger. The detail of Mary wrapping her new-born son in swaddling clothes may easily be overlooked by us. But is clearly important to the gospel writer because he mentions it *twice* in his story. It is a *surprising* detail in that it directs us - even as this early point - toward the end of Jesus' life when the dead Christ will be wrapped in a linen cloth for his burial.

That we are supposed to see the *birth* of Christ in the light of his *death* is confirmed when we look at the *place* where Jesus was born: the manger, the further sign that will confirm for the shepherds the identity of the Saviour. According to the most ancient of traditions this manger was in a *cave*, not the rustic shed we have become used to. Around Bethlehem there is evidence that rocky caves were regularly used as stables, used since ancient times. And a cave of course once more points us to Christ's death, when he is laid in a tomb hewn out of the rock.

Christmas can all too easily become a celebration of the sentimental and the silly. But the gospels won't let us get away with that. However much we are caught up in the sweetness, the attraction, the warmth and appeal of the birth we celebrate, we only do due honour to Christ's birth when we remember that it is but *one aspect* of God's greater plan to save us. In other words, an authentic Christmas faith must also be an Easter faith. With the shepherds, we are invited to gaze upon the manger. But at the same time, we are also invited to see the *bigger* picture Christ's life and death signifies.

Now, the surprising detail of the manger is clearly important to the gospel writer Luke because while he mentions the swaddling cloths twice, he mentions the manger *three* times. Again, a detail we might easily over look, and again perhaps lost in sentimentality. But it really is a powerful sign for us; this one detail saying to us so much of what Christians believe is happening in this holy birth.

While it seems to point us towards Christ's rest in the tomb, the manger also of course speaks to us of the lowliness, the humility of God, who would so condescend as to be born in it. That Jesus was born in stable also suggests to us he was born outside the town, on the fringes of society. It reminds us how his own ministry was to outsiders, to those on the fringes just as his own death was also outside the city walls. A manger: unhospitable, we might say unworthy. But it points us toward Jesus' own ministry of healing and hospitality to all those on the margin, to all those who had had their human dignity diminished. The manger reminds us of the God who has shared in the life of deprivation, obscurity and poverty, the life that continues to afflict so many in our world even today.

But the most basic - and perhaps *the most* surprising - detail of the manger should also not escape us: that it is the feeding trough of animals; the manger where common, ordinary animals take their food. But Christ *laying* in the manger is a sign that he *himself* has become the food; that he is the true bread from heaven; that he is the one who comes to give us true nourishment; the food and nourishment that gives us true life. Mary and Joseph and the shepherds, then, are present at a banquet, a dining room in which a table that has been laid out for them. They are invited to share in a feast. Even as we celebrate this obscure birth we also celebrate the banquet of eternal life Christ has laid out for us; the feast to which we too are all invited to share, and of which we have a foretaste in our celebration of the Eucharist today.

My friends, today many of you will share in the delight of some surprises, perhaps in unwrapping a gift you hadn't expected, perhaps in sharing company with friends and family you haven't seen for a while, and, if your visiting from overseas, perhaps the surprise and delight of a summer Christmas. But let us remember and celebrate the greatest surprise of this day: that God would choose to come and share our life with us; that Christ's birth can only be appreciated in the light of his death; that his birth points us toward our ultimate hope of heaven. On this joyous Christmas day, let us allow ourselves to be surprised by the wonders of his life. Amen.