

Sunday 25 December 2023, Christmas Day Festal Matins

Luke 2.1-14

The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

I'd like to begin this morning with a simple question: What are we doing here?

Why have we got up, got dressed, and travelled to this building on this day of the year? Why are we singing about a baby being born a very, very long time ago. I could probably think of better things to do with my bank holiday. I could be in bed eating chocolate. Or watching my favourite television programme whilst eating chocolate. I could be having fun with my family. And eating too much chocolate.

What are we doing *here*? This is a question I suspect we rarely ask ourselves, or at least not directly. As A.N. Wilson suggested in the Times recently, it would be easy to believe that Christmas survives in the 21st century largely as a result of nostalgia and cultural inertia. People do these things because of warm fuzzy feelings and because, if they didn't have Christmas, what on earth would they replace it with? The celebration of Christmas across the globe is testimony to the appeal of warm feelings-- and the consumerist marketability of a time of extravagant gift giving.

What are *we* doing here? You and I are surely not simply here because of nostalgia or because we really had nothing better to do. Let me suggest that we are here in a church, singing carols, because we know there is more to Christmas than nostalgic sentiment and decadent consumption (despite the amount of chocolate I may eat later today).

We are here because *there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.* We are here because something unique has happened and the whole world has changed because of it. We are here because some unimportant men and their sheep were chosen to be the audience of an angelic message. And those men went and found the baby and his mother. And here we are today, two thousand years later. And there's the baby in the crib.

I may have oversimplified a bit by jumping straight from the shepherds to us, but that's the truth of what we are doing here. We are worshipping that baby because the angels told some shepherds that baby is special, and they believed. We know he is special because, of all the babies born in the backwater Roman province of Judea, he is the one whose lineage we know. He is the one whose mother we know. He is the one whose name we know. And it is his name we sing and praise and adore because that baby is not just a baby but he is, as the angel said, Christ the Lord. The Lord!

That baby, according to St John, is the Word, *and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.* That baby, according to St Paul, is *the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: for by him were all*

things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible... all things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist. That baby, according to the author of Hebrews, is [God's] Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; [He is] the brightness of [God's] glory, and the express image of his person, and uphold[s] all things by the word of his power.

Nostalgia? Habit? Consumer appeal? I don't think so. That is no ordinary baby; and Christmas is no ordinary day; and what we do on Christmas day is no ordinary thing. What we are doing here is offering our praise and thanksgiving in the best way we know how to the one who is Almighty God in human flesh, lying in a manger and crying for his mother's milk.

What we are doing here is acknowledging that the one who was born in the manger made us in the beginning, and watched over us when we lay in our crib. What we are doing is renewing our trust in the one whose mother pondered in her heart the strange visit from the shepherds who said 'An angel told us to come and see!' What we are doing is bowing the knee of our hearts to the one who, as a man, loved us so much that suffered on the cross and died to take away our sins; and then rose from the dead.

No ordinary baby. No ordinary birth. No ordinary Christmas. And no ordinary warm fuzzy feelings. The Creator of the World, the King of the Universe, the Lord of Heaven has come down. He who made us in his image in the beginning has taken on our image in a virgin's womb by the unsurpassed power of the Holy Spirit. And that baby, now grown and ascended into heaven from whence he came, looks down today in love on us who are gathered in worship.

What we are doing here is holy worship of the most holy and loving God Jesus Christ. And it is marvellous to behold that baby and to sing about those shepherds and to join with the angels in the worship that from eternity, and still today, calls the only-begotten Son: The Lord! Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to those on whom his favour rests! Amen.