

Sunday 25 December 2025, Christmas Day Festal Matins

Luke 2.8-20

The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams

Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

Of all the announcements of Jesus' birth, I think the annunciation to the shepherds is my favourite. As I imagine it, it has all the elements of a classic children's story: a countryside location with rustic people going about their work, gently baa-ing fluffy-white sheep, a nighttime setting with shadows and flickering firelight, and a glittering, glorious heavenly messenger... I can almost hear the beating of angelic wings. And after the announcement, there's the excited rush to into Bethlehem, the sweet scene of a blue-mantled mother holding close her tiny baby while a proud father looks on.

Some preachers like to dispel such sentimental images by reminding us of shepherds' lowly place in society, the smell and chaos of sheep, the tiredness of a post-delivery Mary. And some even question the angelic messengers, which, for me, is a step too far. I'll keep my white-winged angels and their Handel's-Messiah-style greeting!- thank you very much.

Christmas is a strange time for the Church. We can struggle to tell again a story so many of us know so very well and, often, there can be a desire on the part of clergy to 'make it real' in order to remind you- the congregation- that these things happened in history, that they're not just a nice story that makes us feel warmly nostalgic about our own childhood Christmases. But I think you know the story is real. I think you know it happened in history. And I think that's why you feel about it the way I do. You and I know the story of Christmas, and it is magical.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur coined the term 'second naivety' which I think applies perfectly to our experience of Christmas. Our faith begins with genuine naivety- youthful, uncritical belief. Over time, our faith is exposed to reality, critical investigation of fact and history. Sometimes it loses some of its lustre. But then comes the realisation that the thing we might have been tempted to discard has a different kind of value than the one we were seeking. We return to our former faith, eyes open, intellect informed, and we see in it a new magic. We return to our childlike naivety willingly because what we have come to know is a deeper truth.

Am I suggesting that it doesn't matter whether or not the story of Christmas is true? That Gabriel's appearance to Mary, the annunciation to the shepherds, the star leading the Wise Men- need not be (at least theoretically) a verifiable historical event? Not at all. I believe the story is true, and true as history. But I am suggesting that mature Christian faith is interested not simply in bare fact, but in the influence that fact has on our perception of life, experience, emotion, and what we call sentiment.

Christian faith at Christmas is not some scientific thing that is only concerned with weighing historic evidence. Christmas faith (let's call it) is a thing which one lives and looks for and gives.

Christmas faith is embodied in our family gatherings, our sharing of stories and good times together, our giving and receiving of time, food, and gifts. It influences who we want to be during this special time of year: we try to be kinder, gentler, more fun-loving, more interested in each other. Christmas faith shines with the warm light of the times in which we were better versions of ourselves and in which the world itself was a better place. It's for good reason that we are nostalgic about our childhood Christmases; in their essential goodness, they represent the world more as it should be.

I want the world I live in to be more like the world at Christmas. I want my life- my inner character, the way I behave- to be more like it is when I'm at my Christmas best. I've done the work of critically examining my faith, even of deconstructing parts of it, and I have returned to where I began, but as a mature, thinking adult. My second naivety shows me that what I valued as a child is still valuable, and perhaps even more so, because it stands in conscious opposition to the type of world I do not want to see or live in. My Christmas faith is a hope for a better world and I know that part of that better world lies in my own choices, words, and actions.

And here's the challenge: how do I make more of my year, more of my life, like Christmas? I think part of the answer is in the text with which I began this sermon: *Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.* I need to return, regularly and consciously, to the side of Jesus Christ and look on his holy face. I need to spend my time consciously considering who I am when I'm at my Christmas best and what I need to do to make myself more of that more of the time. I need to make worship more of a priority- not just being in church, but being truly present with God both in church and outside of it. And I need to trust, as I did when I was a child, that the message God has for me and for my world is one of peace and goodwill: inner peace because of my relationship with Jesus, and goodwill that will lead me through the hard times and back to his side again.

The Christmas story is magical. And its magic is real. Let yourself feel it, and live it. Amen.