

CHURCH TIMES CHRISTMAS FEATURE ARTICLE

A SIGN FOR THE TIMES

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

An infant wrapped in baby clothes was hardly a distinctive sign! You’d have thought that any new born child would have been well wrapped up after leaving the warmth of the womb. A baby clad in bands of cloth would have been of little help to the shepherds in their search through the streets of Bethlehem for this special child.

The mark of distinction was not the infant’s clothing but rather the cot in which he lay. A trough. A manger for feeding livestock. A risky place to put a baby with animals about.

Such a sign would have caught the attention of shepherds. They knew only too well that nature was “red in tooth and claw”. That’s why they spent cold nights on the hills to protect their sheep from wolves savagely descending upon their folds.

A new born babe lying safely in a manger suggested that his promised uniqueness heralded a new world in which there would be a very different relationship between all God’s creatures.

The shepherds might have known that picture of the new world from the Prophet Isaiah where “the wolf shall lie down with the lamb”. Rogues though many of them were, they would have warmed to a vision that took much of the danger out of their work.

The new world that was coming, according to Isaiah, would have a child in the lead and see a radically new relationship between the calf and the lion, the cow and the bear, the nursing child itself and the adder.

This child in a manger, in an animal's feeding trough, in all its unusualness spoke of harmony between all God's creatures. It was nothing less than a sign of the coming Kingdom.

This clue was given to shepherds who knew first-hand the wildness of nature.

In other ways they were a surprising choice for this message. They were disreputable characters, forbidden to act as witnesses in court. It may be why Jesus never called himself 'the Shepherd'. He always qualified it. He styled himself 'The Good Shepherd' as if it could not be taken for granted that a shepherd was always good.

It's one of the reasons why I've always been sceptical of the view that the birth narratives have no basis in history. Why would you make it up or include it if, as Luke was doing, you were trying to convince others of the veracity of your accounts of Jesus' life. Shepherds had no gravitas or authority to lend to the Gospel to persuade others.

Not only were these outsiders the early witnesses of the Good News they together with Mary and Joseph and the wise men gave expression to the first Christian assembly.

The manger was the first altar to bear the Body of Christ and Mary was the first person to minister to the Body of Christ. The wise men, shepherds, Joseph and Mary were the first to hear and give voice to the worship of Christ. So, perhaps it was Christmas, rather than Pentecost, that made the beginnings of the Christian Church. The birth of Christ giving birth to the Church.

This fragile congregation was missionary from the start. Mary treasured all that she had experienced for future disclosure. The wise men bore witness to Herod, but with dove like innocence cloaked in serpentine wisdom, they soon learnt not to cast their pearls before swine and gave him a wide berth on their return from the manger. The shepherds went their way back with a contagion of enthusiasm.

But no sooner had this first celebration of Christmas lost its star-lit wonder than this infant church began to learn the paradox of the life of a faith centred on Christ.

The Nativity is a story of intervention. Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and the wise men, all experienced it in different ways. God invading their worlds. This microcosm of humanity found the course of their lives altered forever, a symbol of God's predictable commitment to his creation and of his unpredictable moments of intervention.

The question that might have bothered them and lingers today is why God intervened to save the world, but stood back from staying the hand of Herod's murderous soldiers as they took the sword to innocent children. This is the question that people of Christian faith have wrestled with constantly.

Faith is like a piece of string that disappears up into the clouds and tugs occasionally. There are times of spiritual intimacy when through silence or sacrament, through nature or fellowship we sense the presence of God. Then there can follow long periods of alienation when spiritual intimacy gives away to distance, doubt and even despair not least when cries for God to intervene go unheeded.

There's new despair in the air at what is unfolding in the Middle East once such a theatre of God's intervention. The place where the Church was born is rapidly becoming the graveyard of Christianity. We look on as helpless as the mothers of the Innocents. As IS holds a knife to the throats of humanitarian workers and rapes and slaughters Christians, people have pleaded and prayed but to no avail.

But this is not a new scenario in the history of Christianity. One of the first to put Christians to the sword was Saul. In case we skate over the brutality of his aggression we should remember that his acts were as violent and as merciless as those of IS.

After his conversion to Christ and years later, at the end of a letter he wrote to Christians in Rome Paul gave a clue to his change of heart. He wrote of two relatives 'who were in Christ before I was'. Presumably, Junias and Andronicus, when they saw their cousin murdering their Christian brothers and sisters, sought to love him and pray for him. It's what our Lord told us to do to terrorists.

Perhaps it's too uncomfortable a thought for Christmas but a universal campaign to pray for Jihadi John and his comrades that love would conquer their hearts would be in the spirit of the early church. It's the only intervention that I can think of that would obviate escalation.

Such an intervention would be consonant with the example of Paul who did more than any other to establish the church in the Mediterranean world.

Those angels who sent shepherds searching for a sign sang them on their way,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace...."

This was the theme that the Christ Child would one day take up and make the centrepiece of his universal prayer: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” It’s a petition for the earthing of heaven. A new world where the relationships between all God’s creatures will be transformed towards peace in the re-unification of earth and heaven.

In Bethlehem, ‘The House of Bread’, the first church turned a feeding stall into an altar upon which they laid the Body of Christ. It was a sign for their times and for ours. In our Christmas Eucharist we feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving.

1199 words

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