

Vendée Christmas Eve

Isaiah 52.7-10

Hebrews 1.1-4[5-12]

John 1.1-14.

The Word became flesh and lived (demeuré) among us. May we see his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth, and make hi known. Amen.

Imagine Mary, at full term, riding on a donkey on rough tracks, and then finding there is no room at the inn. Not a good start. The baby is born, not in a maternity ward, not with an attendant midwife, but in either a cave or a stable, and then there is all joy and excitement.

Luke expresses this by describing the song of the angels, 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth'. Praise and worship are the mark of Christmas. The shepherds come to worship. The wise men come to worship, bringing valuable gifts, as we shall celebrate on January 6th, the Epiphany. Will you have your Galettes des Rois?

Praise is such a lovely part of our relationship with God. It can never be over the top because it comes from us who are incomplete, imperfect, addressed to God who is completely perfect. It can come in awesome silence, in words like alleluia; Holy, Holy, Holy; Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit; in music, most wonderfully perhaps in Handel's Halleluiah Chorus, or repeating words like Jesus, Jesus, wonderful Lord.

Other prayers move from us, to God, to us: we thank you, Lord, for what you have given us. Lord Jesus, I ask you to

give healing to my friend who is unwell, to use the word so current in England.

I like the expression, ‘praise the bridge when you walk over it’. Years ago it was the custom in Scotland for a prayer to be said as the old-timer crossed a bridge: "God bless the bridge and the man who made it." Indeed, a bridge is a metaphor for the Incarnation. As an Orthodox prayer puts it, “Salut, celeste echelle – I know that means ladder! – ou Dieu est descendé; salut pont reliant la terre au ciel”.

Praise is also a great gift among us. In an adversarial situation, war of words, war of weapons, constant adverse criticism, it is easy to wear people down.

Perhaps the greatest gift we can give this Christmas, is to affirm and encourage one another in the same way as God affirms and encourages us by the gift of his Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

That was what I thought was going to be the point of this Christmas sermon. But at first I missed the point. One of the many paradoxes in the Christian faith is that, in Christ, we see both God and human. Look again at where we started, with the heavily pregnant Mary riding on a donkey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Nothing could be more human than that, with all the anxiety, discomfort, pain, rejection, fear. Yet the child who is born – a male child to a female mother, both sexes are vital in the incarnation – is both God and human. No ordinary child’s birth would be heralded by the angelic choirs – Hark the herald angels sing – the visit of the shepherds – While Shepherds watched their flocks by night - the visit of the Magi with their three costly gifts – We three kings of orient re - the wrath of Herod, jealously fearing for his power and position. Then another paradox: the earthly ruler feeling threatened by the King of Kings, born in human form. Isn’t it all wonderful? Praise the Lord!

So we have the paradox of shepherds visiting the Good Shepherd, the Magi visiting the King of Kings and the King of Kings being hunted down by King Herod.

You might like to read one of the Christmas accounts in Matthew 1 v 18 to end of 2, Luke 2, vv 1 to 20, or John 1 vv 1 to 18, before dinner tomorrow. Don't forget to praise the cook! Have a wonderfully Happy Christmas.

Now to him who is able to keep you from falling, and to make you stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only wise God our Saviour, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, power and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen.