

Date: Christmas 2018
Occasion: Eucharist

Readings: Midnight: Set III: Isaiah 53.7 – 10, Hebrews 1.1 – 4[5 – 12], John 1.1 – 14

Morning: Set I: Isaiah 9.2 – 7, Titus 2.11 – 14, Luke 2.1 – 20

Telling stories

I don't know whether you have ever had the privilege of being nearby while young children play. Whether alone, or with other children, they have an enviable ability to enter into a world, to become immersed into a story of their own creation, that grows out of whatever lies to hand. Snatches of memory, TV programmes, films, books, things they've heard and seen at home, at school, wherever, all become part of a world of the imagination which is unselfconscious, full of truths and insights; a world of wonder, danger and excitement, where wrongs are righted and, crucially, important issues of fairness are addressed.

As a lifelong lover of stories, I find it ironic and somehow deeply satisfying that adults can only come anywhere near to emulating what children invent effortlessly, with the greatest effort and skill. It takes a Cervantes, a Tolstoy or a Melville to come anywhere near my own granddaughter's inventiveness and insight.

One of the pleasures of the buildup to Christmas is when this wonderfully disruptive inventiveness of children, barely controlled by their hardworking teachers, addresses the Christmas story with an intuitive absorption in its insights. There is the script, but because young children haven't yet

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learned to mistrust the power and importance of stories in a way that we adults often do, things never really go strictly according to plan.

Children understand that not all stories have straightforwardly happy endings, and that the best ones will always have moments of drama and real sadness. Hence our reactions to school nativities: we tell ourselves it's because they're 'cute' (whatever that means), but it's so much more than that.

Come to think of it, I sometimes wonder if the success of Rowling's Harry Potter novels is because they aren't cute, because they take children seriously.

The best stories resist any attempts to reduce them to simple moral formulae; they will always be more than the edifying but ultimately unsatisfying moralising of Aesop's Fables.

This is never more true than in the stories of Jesus's birth. Hardship, cruelty, the indifference of officialdom, and exile are interwoven with the kindness of strangers, new life and the persistence of hope to tell a story that gets repeated not just every year, but every time we suspend our scepticism, our cynicism, and allow ourselves to believe that justice will prevail, that lost innocence doesn't mean the loss of hope.

For my part, my only regret about all this is that for most people it stops there. And to them I want to say this.

Christmas isn't a story about innocence and God forbid it should ever be about cuteness. It's a story about recognising

that lost innocence cannot be restored, but has been transformed by grace – which is another way of saying that our stories of love, loss, disappointment and all the other stuff that life brings, will always be what it is. But it will never be the whole story.

Midnight: *When John began his story of Jesus with the words we have just heard, he wasn't indulging in some abstract, other-worldly meditation. He was taking us to what he saw as the heart of the story. He was introducing us to the idea that the story of Jesus as God's story in the world is also ours. Whether we recognise it or not, John tells us, that by opening ourselves to the possibility of Jesus becoming part of our story, earth meets heaven in us. In these fourteen verses, we have everything laid before us: a God who refuses to remain distant, a God who invites us to join in without forcing us, a God who invites real people to do real things to make a difference.*

Morning: *When Luke introduces the shepherds, he was relying on his original audience to recognise them for who they were: hard bitten, tough men on the margins of the community in every sense. If anyone was going to be sceptical, it was likely to be the shepherds. And yet they allowed themselves to become part of the story of a God who refuses to remain distant, a God who invites us to join in without forcing us, a God who invites real people to do real things to make a difference.*

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Whichever way you look at it, the gospel stories that introduce us to the God of Jesus, aren't about once upon a time. They are about allowing ourselves to acknowledge and be transformed here, now, in Shirley, by acknowledging that Jesus' story, God's story of love and saving justice is ours, now and always.

Amen.