

Sermon for 21/12/25 at St James, Shirley

Advent 4

In London in about 1875, Christina Rossetti, the daughter of an Italian refugee wrote a beautiful and meaningful poem, which we sing today as a carol.

*'In the bleak midwinter
Frosty wind made moan
Earth stood hard as iron,
Water like a stone.
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter,
Long ago.'*

The writer wasn't imagining a nice crisp sunny day when you could build a snowman, toboggan and throw snowballs. The snow is in dangerously deep drifts. The puddles are iced over. The wind is that strong, cold and cutting sort of wind which you don't want to be out in any longer than you absolutely have to. It is bleak.

Last week, I received a Christmas letter from a friend working in Uganda, quoting a version of the opening verse written by an African poet. It goes like this:

*'In the bleak mid-summer
Dusty winds made moan
Earth stood hard as iron
Water dirty brown,
Dust was blowing, dust on dust
In the bleak mid-summer
Not so long ago.'*

The African poet wasn't imagining a nice warm sunny day when you drink iced drinks, swim and sunbathe. The dust is in your eyes as well as your clothes. Most of the ground is bare and baked so hard that nothing will grow in it. The wind is that strong, hot and lacerating kind that you don't want to be out in any longer than you absolutely have to. It is bleak.

And bleak places are not the sort of places where you might expect to find God. Surely God should be safely tucked up in heaven where you don't have to hunch your back against a biting cold wind or shield your eyes from a driving dust storm.

But in the original version, Christina writes, heaven cannot 'hold' him. I love her choice of the word 'hold'. She is saying heaven is too small to contain God. It can't keep him in. And where he chooses to go instead is this wind-blown bleak earth just as it is.

She goes on to write:

'Our God, heav'n cannot hold him

*Nor earth sustain
Heav'n and earth shall flee away
When he comes to reign.
In the bleak mid-winter
A stable place sufficed
The lord God Almighty
Jesus Christ.'*

Bleak places are not the sort of places where you might expect to find God. But the God who is too big for heaven chooses to be here and chooses to shelter from the world's relentless winds in what might have been no more than a shack. A place in a stable is quite sufficient for his needs.

Bleak places may not be the sort of places where you expect to find God. But maybe God wants to identify with those who are frozen to the bone sleeping on town centre streets in the bleakness of winter weather. And God wants to be as close as possible to those who are hungry in African villages because of drought in the bleakness of mid-summer heat waves.

And God choosing to do this makes the angels a bit redundant. Occasionally they have a job to take a message from God to someone on earth. One of them has recently been to Mary to tell her that she was going to have son. But their real job is to surround God with unending praise and adoration. Whether the most senior archangel or some junior cherub, that is their normal job. But not in our poem.

*'Angels and Archangels
May have gathered there
Cherubim and Seraphim
Thronged the air –
But only his mother
In her maiden bliss
Worshipped the Beloved
With a kiss.*

*Enough for him, whom cherubim,
Worship night and day
A breastful of milk
And a manger full of hay:
Enough for him who angels
Fall down before
The ox and ass and camel
Which adore.'*

The angels' job of surrounding God with praise and adoration is being done by a human woman and a number of farmyard animals. And God seems quite happy with the exchange so the angels have to go off to sing to some shepherds instead,

Bleak places are not the sort of place you'd expect to find God. But if God is to be as near as possible to those who are frozen to the bone sleeping on Birmingham streets and to those who are hungry in African villages, then he has to settle for the things

which a child in such circumstances would have and no more. The human contact and love of a kiss. The basic food of breast milk. The make-do hay lining the make-do crib.

There will be people today who feel themselves to be in a bleak place. Some will be grieving the pain of loss, through bereavement, or redundancy or divorce. Some will be cold and homeless. I think every Christmas of those around Southwark Bridge in London where I volunteered with the charity Crisis at Christmas. But some will feel bleak for totally different reasons. The poet tells us that today God is trying to be as close to them as he can be.

And when we find him close to us, maybe we find we that we want to respond. The writer finishes

*'What can I give him?
Poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd
I would bring a lamb;
If I were a wise man
I would play my part
Yet what I can I give him
Give my heart.'*

When we realise that God chooses to be close to those most in need around us, and chooses to be close to us as well, then we may find that we in turn want to be as close as possible to God.

At Christmas heaven comes to us in the ordinary. A baby is born in unremarkable circumstances to ordinary people who God chose to do extraordinary things with. We have all the elements of the Christmas story in Shirley Parish today – teenage mums, stepfathers, stars in the sky, a pub, wise men, asylum seekers and even the odd angel or two.

A God who only turns up when the going's good, who's never to be found when people are struggling, would be a waste of time. We deserve better. The Christmas story reassures us that God has walked where we are now, in a world like ours and so therefore there is hope – outrageous hope – and the source of that hope is God. **Our** God, source of all love and meaning, who loves us so much that he risked putting his Son's life in our hands.

Bleak places are not the sort of places where you expect to find God. But when you do find him there, you know that our God is a 'been there, done it, got the T-shirt' God.

God is still in flesh and blood. But at Christmas God became flesh and blood in a partnership of love, and like Mary, we too have the chance to say "Yes" to that partnership and discover afresh the meaning of our lives. A choice to live life for the **meaning** of the moment, and not just the thrill, and to turn away from anything that promises a thrill but delivers meaninglessness.