

Christ Church, Bath

Christmas Morning
Friday 25 December 2020, 10am

Isaiah 9.2-7
Titus 2.11-14
St Luke 2.1-14

When you were listening to Clive reading those familiar words of Isaiah, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined”, who was Isaiah’s prophecy referring to? If you were a vicar preparing a sermon you might go back to your Old Testament history and tell people that it was the subjects of King Hezekiah in the 720s before Christ, who were living under the shadow of invasion from Assyria. I bet you that some of us listening to this same passage read at our carol service last Sunday thought it might have been looking forward to people like the shepherds watching their flocks by night, suddenly dazzled by the bright vision of the glory of the LORD. Or today we might be praying for all those living under the dark shadow of bereavement and pandemic.

We humans have been communicating with each other by telling stories from way back, from well before the invention of writing. It’s stories that tell us who we are, what it is to be human, how we should conduct ourselves in an otherwise confusing world.

There are stories and stories of course, good stories and bad stories, good news and bad news, true stories and false stories. And do you know how to tell the difference? Ask yourself this question. Is this story doing people good, not just making them feel better but actually helping them to *be* better? Or is it doing harm, perhaps encouraging them (or us) to hurt other people? Just think of the damage that's done by evil propaganda or even fake news!

Good stories bear repeating. (By the way, the reason why dictators and modern-day Herods keep repeating their evil propaganda is because they want to persuade us that their stories are good.) We tell favourite stories time and again. Think of our favourite stories when we were children. We never tired of hearing them. It's particularly true of the Christmas story. Many of us heard it last Sunday. Some of us listened to it again last night. And some of us might even be here in forty-eight hours to hear it on Sunday! Ask yourself why? What are we getting out of it? Doesn't it warm our hearts? Might it even make

us want to do something nice, like give our loved ones a present?

The really good stories come in lots of versions, and it rarely matters that the details vary in the telling. This is true of the ancient stories, like the tales of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table for instance. It's true of the Christmas stories. We've been listening to St Luke's take on it this morning. There's also St Matthew's. He tells us about the wise men and Herod's rage. New Testament scholars will tell you of other ancient versions found in apocryphal gospels, and last year I was at the Mosque in Manvers St looking at the Christmas story as it's told in the Qur'an.

I don't think the differences matter. I don't think our young peoples' nativity play last Sunday was any less Christian, or less traditional, even though I can't find any reference to multi-coloured dragons in the gospels of Matthew or Luke. What matters is that it's a *good* story. What matters is above all is that our Christmas story is true.

And by that I mean the following. The good news that the angels brought the shepherds, or the wise men took home with them, changed peoples lives for the better. Their story points us not just to a tiny newborn babe lying in a manger, but to how God comes into peoples' lives and opens up whole new possibilities. We see this happening as we follow the story of the newborn babe, transforming the lives of the people he lived with in Galilee and Jerusalem. We see the story continuing in what happened next, when the apostles like Peter and Paul took the story across the known world. I've seen the story changing lives for good in my work as a vicar, as light and hope came into lives which were being lived in very dark places.

Above all, the story will continue in you and me as we leave this church, and share our Christmas festivities, whether it's round a table or on Zoom or in a phone call, and our greetings, our smiles, our laughter and our joy brighten the lives of all around us.

For the story Isaiah told, and the story St Luke continues, is as true today as it was all those years ago.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.