

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole

Christmas Eve
Tuesday, December 24, 2019

Isaiah 9:2-7
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14(15-20)
Psalm 96

Hands up all the children here today? I have two jobs for you later on. One you will see at the end of the sermon. The other is at the end of the service when I will ask you to come and join the clergy at the Creche where we will bless the Creche, put the baby in the manger and sing Silent Night together. In the meantime, I want you to be very quiet so I can say just a few words to the adults here tonight. You can listen too of course!

Christmas shopping is either an act of devotion or a chore. A wife and husband are out shopping for Christmas. They are in a large shopping Mall. At one point the wife looks round and can't see her husband anywhere so she calls him on his cell phone. "Where are you darling? We have a lot to get done." The husband replies, "You remember that jewelry store we came to ten years ago where you fell in love with that diamond neckless that I couldn't afford to buy you at the time?" A smile come to her face and her eyes lit up as she answered, "Why yes I remember." "Well," he said, "I am in the motorbike shop next door."

If you are from my generation you will remember the first version of the film "The Italian Job" The one made in 1969 with Michael Cain in it. It is all about a complex heist and involves an unlikely escape through a traffic jammed city using Morris Minor Mini Cooper's. One quote from the film became particularly famous both generally and for me personally. During rehearsals for the heist the team is practicing blowing the doors off a security van. There is a dramatic countdown and then a huge explosion. Nothing is left of the van except bits of metal. Michael Cain says in exasperation. "You were only supposed to blow the ... doors off!"

What's the strangest Christmas you've ever had? Maybe stuck travelling in snowstorm? Perhaps you found yourself once in a country that doesn't celebrate Christmas at all?

The strangest Christmas I ever had, has to have been in a place called Basra back in 2006 when I was Chaplain to the British 19th Light Brigade in Iraq. The Divisional commander had decided to launch an operation against a police station called the Jamiat. It had been taken over by some renegade elements of the police force that were acting like a mafia gang and were holding and torturing people on a regular basis. To launch a Brigade sized operation on Christmas Eve / Christmas Day was a risk. Authorities back home in London were not convinced. To lose the lives of British soldiers on Christmas Day would be big, and very bad news indeed. I wasn't convinced either to be honest. I spoke to the Commander and wondered if we really should be doing this on Christmas Eve and Day. His view was that there was no better thing to do on Christmas Day than to rescue people from torture and to rid the world of the people that were doing it. He had a point I thought. So it was, that the midnight service on Christmas Eve was one of the strangest, and yet most powerful I have known. A large group of us were gathered in the Headquarters, which was the foyer of a large unfurnished Hotel. We were singing carols and celebrating the Eucharist by candlelight and even as we sung and celebrated, we knew that columns of soldiers were pushing out into the darkness and into danger. We expected casualties. The contrast between the birth in the stable and the Angels declaration of Peace and Goodwill and the darkness of that night and of the torture and conflict at its heart, could not have been more poignant. In the end, after a long tense night and morning, the operation went far better than expected and we did not have a single casualty. 127 Prisoners were freed and the evidence of torture revealed and collected. Perhaps not such a bad thing to do on Christmas Day in fact. The Jamiat police station was then leveled to the ground by the Engineers. It was a little like "The Italian Job", in that Engineers are very experienced at blowing up bridges but not at leveling buildings. They used Tank Bar mines for the job and they used a couple too many. The building was not so much leveled as spread across a mile radius! So it was that the quote from "The Italian Job" became very current for a while in 19 Lt Bde. "You were only supposed to blow the ... doors off!!"

Christmas is full of contrasts.

The simple Shepherds and the regal angels. The little Holy Family in the animals' cave and the son of God come to earth as one of us. The contrasts are no less sharp

today. Christmas in Georgetown is no doubt different in a number of respects from Christmas in parts of NE Washington or in some places in Africa and the poorer parts of the world. Yet, for all of us, the basic contrast between the divine light in the eyes of the baby in the manger and the darkness and complexity of the world we live in is always there. Tonight, we stand in the eye of the storms that rage in the world and in our lives, and find here, a single point of stillness that cuts through it all.

At the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem, the traditional site of the birth of Christ, there is only one door by which you can enter. I remember going there when I was 18 years old and the only way you can get in, is by bowing over very low, because the lintel of the door is only about four feet from the ground. Only a very small child can walk in upright, which is very much the point, as we must all become children again to walk that way. The place where the first creche stood and where Jesus was born can only be approached in the spirit of humility. We have to leave all our status in the world, and all our struggles too, at the door and bow our heads.

This is not just because we need to have humble hearts though.

Whether we are the soldier back from many operations, or one of the many people caught up in the political machinations and intrigue on the Hill; whether we are the business person, struggling constantly with the vagaries of supply chains and manufacturers and retail outlets or the family out of work, or struggling with debt or addiction or damaged relationships or all the many things that people face each Christmas; whatever we are, we are all battered and hardened by experience.

Over the years, that experience places armor upon our hearts and inflicts scars that heal only with hard callouses over them. All our digging for gold, approval, success or just for survival, throws up earthworks around our hearts and minds and souls until there is almost nothing that gets through. At least not easily. Without even knowing it, we can build castles of experience that are strong but also rather lonely places to be. To get through the door to the stable we have to leave these things behind also.

Today, we come to kneel before the newborn Christ and allow this simple but profound truth to pierce our armor and the darkness of the world's night. As John Betjeman puts it beautifully in his poem "Christmas",

And is it true ? For if it is,
No loving fingers tying strings
Around those tissueed fripperies,
The sweet and silly Christmas things,
Bath salts and inexpensive scent
And hideous tie so kindly meant,

No love that in a family dwells,
No carolling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single Truth compare -
That God was man in Palestine
And lives today in Bread and Wine.

Shortly we will bow before the creche and receive his life in ours in the bread and wine of the Eucharist.

Now children - your moment has come! Merry Christmas!

I wish you all a holy, blessed, and most joyful Christmas.