

A Sermon by the Reverend Timothy A R Cole
Christmas Eve
Thursday, December 24, 2020

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

There is a history, perhaps more a myth, of monarchs going incognito among their subjects.

As some of you know, in connection with my military service in the British Army, I was privileged, all be it for only a few years, to be a Queen's Honorary Chaplain, and, as a consequence, for a time, a minor member of the Royal Household.

I like the incognito story of the Queen, walking one day in the village of Balmoral in Scotland with her dogs. Balmoral, her summer holiday residence, is one of the only places that she can just walk down the village street more or less like anyone else. Once, apparently, she was stopped by a passing tourist who said, "Excuse me, do you know, you look exactly like the Queen! To which the Queen is meant to have replied with a smile. "How very Reassuring!" Before walking on.

That story, lovely though it is, may or may not be apocryphal. One true and documented incident however did take place on May 8th 1945 when the then Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret went incognito into the crowds of thousands of joyous people celebrating VE Day on the streets of London.

"We were terrified of being recognized," the Queen recalled later. She wore her Auxiliary Territorial Service uniform to avoid being spotted by the crowd. All around her, people were linking arms and walking down the street "swept along on a tide of happiness and relief." Margaret Rhodes, who was with the entourage that night, remembers Elizabeth and her companions doing the conga through the front door of the "stuffy and formal" Ritz Hotel— an impromptu move that did not sit well with every guest. "As one congaed, though, eyebrows were raised," she recalled.

A highlight of the night was when the girls were able to watch their parents appear on the balcony of Buckingham Palace as spectators, and not participants.

If you have ever been to the Holy Land, it is possible that you may have visited the Franciscan Chapel of the Shepherds Field at Bethlehem. I am not usually a great fan of modern church buildings. They are often angular and ugly, in my view. The architect of the Shephard's Filed Chapel and a number of churches in the Holy Land was the Italian, Antonio Barluzzi and his Churches are a very different matter. The Shepard's Fields Chapel is a round stone structure with a domed roof. When you enter it is quite dark with the only light comes down from a window at the center of the dome above. The interior is circular with the altar in the middle. The effect is stunning. A column of light stands on the altar like the pure abstract presence of an angel.

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” The feeling in that chapel for me was as if one of the multitudes of that heavenly host the shepherds saw had remained to sing the praise, we heard in the Christmas Gospel just now, right down to our own day.

Angels are a remarkable Idea. They appear at many times of significance in the scriptures. C S Lewis attempts to describe such a figure in one of his science fiction stories, “Voyage to Venus’. He sees it as being akin to a pillar of light. A being of piercing purity and power giving the impression of one moving on a different plane altogether, as if standing still here, involves continuous movement on his part to limit himself to being present to us. The Angel, he says, leant at a slight angle but, such was its powerful presence, it felt like it was the room that was tilted to one side while the angel was standing perfectly straight.

This Christmas, we might imagine ourselves for a moment as one the shepherds out in the fields trying to keep warm on a long cold dark night. Perhaps this year, we feel the cold and dark of our world more than usual. We see the loss and brokenness around us in so many ways, and we sense perhaps the wild beasts of sickness, rage and division circling around us in the dark, just beyond the light of the fire. The heavenly vision the shepherds saw that first Christmas night seems so far beyond what we poor sin stained, battered and divided people can ever aspire to be. Their light, pure and absolute; our lives weak, and compromised.

Yet, God in the Scriptures, places humanity, for all our frailty, born of our free will, above the angels. In his poem “On Being Human” CS Lewis makes just this point, for all the majesty of angels he says,

“Yet here, within this tiny, charmed interior,
This parlor of the brain, their Maker shares
With living men some secrets in a privacy
Forever ours, not theirs.”

For all our shabby shepherds’ attire and their celestial brightness of being, we have something they do not have.

As we cower beneath the vision of the heavenly host and see our world all the darker by the comparison with their stunning light, we also hear their amazing message, that God has chosen our form and being, and not theirs, to come into the world. Unto us is born this day, not an angelic being of unapproachable power and light, but a tiny baby boy, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Here is a King who comes incognito into his kingdom to walk as one of his subjects and, ultimately, to put himself into our unclean hands in order to win our hearts and souls and our salvation. Here is a God who is a participant rather than a spectator. Like the princesses, on VE Day, watching the distant majesty of their parents on the balcony, Jesus is here with us in the crowd.

This Christmas, as we feel the strangeness, and limitations and darkness of this time, we should take heart in this choice that God has made for us, and our kind, over all his dazzling created beings of power and light.

We should take heart that the small struggling figure in the straw is actually a light against which the darkness, that seems so great to us, can only fall back in dismay. Like cold shepherds, we gather close around the fire as we hear the vicious beasts prowling in the night around us, but, as we gaze at light coming from the stable door, we realize those beasts may roar, but actually, they are very much afraid.

May his light, fill all our gatherings, however small and distanced, and our homes this Christmas. Just as wars come to end, so do pandemics. Until then we are sustained and made strong by what we celebrate this day. The world may not recognize him in all its chaos, struggle and strife, but we recognize him and, in his eyes, we see, the kingdom that has begun.