

Christmas 2017

This passage from John's Gospel is so well known. We hear it every Christmas, and it becomes so familiar that the depth of it is often lost on us. Verse 11 tells us that, "*He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him*".

At that first Christmas, the Word became flesh. God walked among us, full of grace and truth. But there is a sadness in this too because, as John reminds us, "*He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.*"

The Son of God became visible to us and walked among us at Bethlehem but the great tragedy of history is that he was not accepted or recognised.

"*His own people did not accept him*". His own people, the Jewish race, did not accept him. From the very beginning, with King Herod trying to kill him, through his period as a refugee in Egypt, through his ministry with opposition from Pharisees and Sadducees, through to his crucifixion on Good Friday, "*His own people did not accept him*".

The Christmas story, sadly, is the story of the unwelcome Christ. "*He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.*"

This midnight as we come to St Mary's to celebrate the Christmas story, the question before us is whether we will accept him and welcome him into our lives.

Welcoming Christ into the world, into the church, into our lives, is what Christmas is all about because welcoming Christ is actually at the heart of the Christmas story. There are so many myths surrounding the Christmas story that we often miss what the Bible really says and we don't look carefully enough at the story and so are in danger of missing the point.

How many of us remember the innkeeper in the story at the inn where Mary and Joseph are turned away? Well, of course, when we read the Gospel accounts of Christmas there is no innkeeper mentioned and Mary and Joseph are not turned away. We are told that there is no room at the inn - but the word used here for inn is 'kataluma', which means 'guesthouse'. Guesthouses in Palestine in Jesus' day, were on two open floors, the upper floor being bedrooms and the lower floor for cattle and horses. Palestinian culture would not have allowed the turning away of a guest as hospitality was taken very seriously. Joseph was back in his home town. Mary had connections there, through her cousin Elizabeth,

whose husband Zechariah was an important priest. Perhaps there was no room in the kataluma, the upstairs part of the guesthouse, but it is clear that Joseph and Mary were welcomed even if they had to be in the downstairs part.

Christ was welcomed into the world at his birth, born into a loving yet humble home. Then the shepherds came from the fields. They were men of poverty with humble jobs and a lowly status in society but they welcomed Christ. Ironically, and somewhat embarrassingly, it seems that the humble and lowly inn keeper welcomed Christ, the humble and lowly shepherds welcomed Christ - but the holy and religious people of God did not welcome him.

What a challenge to our comfort and complacency this story is! This is an upside-down story because it does not work out how we think it should. Surely the priests and the religious people should be there to welcome Christ but they are the ones who have missed him. It is the lowly, the poor and the marginalised who recognise the Messiah for who he truly is.

God meets us in our humility and poverty of spirit. Welcoming Christ is something we do out of our poverty of spirit. When we have those meaningful conversations with ourselves where we say, “Lord, I don’t have much to give you...I’m not very righteous, in fact I get so much wrong in my life...Lord, I don’t have much to offer you at all, but what I have, you can have...”

That is the type of welcome that Jesus wants. The welcome of the lowly guesthouse, the welcome of the poor shepherds. Christina Rossetti’s poem reminds us,

*“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 do my part. Yet what I can I give him – give my heart”*

That’s all he wants- not exactly rocket science is it? John writes, *“He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him”*. Let’s not be numbered amongst those people this morning. Let’s welcome Christ – in the only way we know how - by giving him our hearts this Christmas. Interestingly enough very little has changed and even the romance and cosiness of Christmas cannot get us away from reality.

In June 2010, the Government announced plans for a 10 per cent cut in housing benefit for anyone on Jobseekers' Allowance for more than a year. Crisis argued that single homeless people would be the hardest hit because they would not be entitled to any other income support from the state - other than their Jobseeker's Allowance. Forced to make up the shortfall in Housing Benefit

with a substantial proportion of their dole money, the amount left for food, clothing and energy would rapidly decrease.

There was great rejoicing at the Chancellor's recent announcement about the cutting of Stamp Duty to encourage first time buyers- very laudable but not much use when house building is at its lowest and nimbyism at its highest in today's society. Half of the families receiving supplies from food banks have children aged between five and eleven, recent research has revealed. The Trussell Trust, which runs more than 420 food banks, said its study showed how close to crisis many families are living. There were over 67,500 three-day emergency food supplies given to families with children in July and August, 4,000 more than the previous year.

Samantha Stapley, operations manager for England at the Trussell Trust, said: "Over a third of all the food distributed by food banks in our network consistently goes to families with children, but these new figures show five to 11 year-olds are more likely than other children to receive a food bank's help.

This highlights just how close to crisis many families are living. We can all make a difference - checking which food your local food bank is running low on and donating to make sure emergency food is available when people are referred to help is a simple and effective way to get involved.

As a nation, we also must address the reasons why families with children are referred to food banks in the first place. We welcome the Government's decision to maintain free school lunches for children during term time - the next step must be to help families during the holidays.

Food banks are doing more than ever before but voluntary organizations alone cannot stop primary school children facing hunger.

We are keen to share our insights with the Government alongside other charities to inform a long-term coordinated solution to stop families falling into crisis."

All this in civilised, caring Britain in the twenty first century!

*"He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him"*

Sometimes I think we should be ashamed of ourselves but despite all of this, as we celebrate the Word made flesh, the coming of hope into the world may I wish you all a very Happy and Blessed Christmas.

Amen.