

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : December 24th, 2020
“Christmas Eve”

CHRISTMAS EVE 2020 AT 9PM

In late November a photo and an article in a newspaper caught my eye. Headlined “This is where Jesus lived” it tells the story of a British archeologist at Reading University, Dr Ken Dark. He has spent 14 years studying a 1st century dwelling now beneath a convent in Nazareth, the city in Northern Israel where Jesus spent his early years. He writes: “It is a significant structure which probably included several living and storage rooms around a courtyard, a roof terrace and a rock-cut staircase that still survives. The house shows excellent craftsmanship which means it would have been built and owned by a *tekton*: the original Greek description of Joseph’s occupation in the Gospels. Besides translating as ‘carpenter’ it also means a stonemason or builder”. Professor Dark believes there is a strong case that the well-preserved house was, indeed, Christ’s home. I think that is very exciting – but in truth, who really knows. There is certainly no doubt that a visit to the Holy Land gives a real sense of the place where Jesus lived and worked – not least in the unchanging landscape around.

Why do I mention this tonight? Well, I have long thought that Christmas is about God emphasizing the ordinary and giving ordinary people a sense of their own worth. In the first place God chose an insignificant town, Bethlehem, to be the place where his Son, our Saviour, was to be born - and indeed in the whole Christmas story, we see God entrusting himself to humanity in very ordinary people, Christmas is not for just children but also for those of us who are adults and going on in years. John Bell from the Iona Community in Scotland puts it like this:

“There are lots of older people who are forgotten in the Christmas story but who are crucial to it. There are Elizabeth and Zechariah the priest - there are Simeon and Anna, who when Christ is later taken to the Temple, realize that this is God incarnate. Indeed, apart from Mary and Jesus, Joseph, the Wise Men, Herod, the Shepherds - all are older, up in years. Christmas is a time when God puts a new value and expectation on those who think they are past it. He expects those of us who are more senior in our years to be the midwives of the new thing that God wants us to do and to be through the birth of his Son into our dark and distracted world.”

So, take heart this Christmas night – God can still speak to people and act in people whatever their age. Christmas is a story of upheaval and uncertainty, but ultimately a story of hope, of kindness and generosity.

One final thing – we should not forget the one person crucial to the Christmas story who is all but invisible - the innkeeper. He was there because he felt sorry for someone in difficulty and tried to do something to help. He did not just feel sorry - he did something about it and gave hope.

In a year like no other that we have ever experienced, through all the upheaval and uncertainty that we still continue to go through, may we tonight, wherever we are, at home online or here in church, hold on to the hope of the Christmas story.

I leave the final words to one of my favourite poets, John Betjeman. His final verse in the poem Christmas sums up everything we are here for tonight:

*“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”.*

And for that single Truth – Amen.

