Christmas Midnight Sermon

Bishop of Chichester

Christmas 2020

Perhaps there always was something *kitsch* about depicting the Christmas crib. A 4th century epitaph, in the Lateran Museum in Rome, shows three slightly camp Magi delivering gifts to the Christ child enthroned on his mother’s lap, using line drawings that prefigure the best of modern newspaper cartoons.

Just over a thousand years later, in Florence, where Fra Angelico is doing ground-breaking work on perspective and emotional realism, he thinks nothing of adding a couple of martyr saints to the crib scene, allowing the angels who oversee the episode to be in conversation (gossiping about what’s going on below), and even the ox and the ass seem exchange knowing looks.

Around 500 hundred years after that, we were still unabashed by elements of kitsch in the wonderfully rustic and lyrical paintings that adorn St Michael’s church in Berwick, East Sussex. The nativity scene was painted by Vanessa Bell, setting the stable in Sussex countryside, featuring a rare breed of Sussex sheep, local shepherds, an offering of veg for supper, harvested from the kitchen garden, and the housekeeper’s children to model as extras, though it was Vanessa’s daughter, Angelica, who was Mary.

Vanessa Bell, Duncan Bell and Duncan Grant, who delivered this charming decorative scheme for Berwick church were privileged by an education that had immersed them in the intellectual and artistic culture of their day. If their project was kitsch, it chose to be, and it had an extremely respectable social and artistic pedigree. And how well those 20th century artists would have appreciated the observation of their contemporary and associate, W H Auden, who writes a poem about the religious paintings in the Musée des Beaux Arts, in Paris, noting that daily life is the obvious setting for the events of sacred history:

When the aged are reverently, passionately waiting

For the miraculous birth, there always must be

Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating

On a pond at the edge of the wood.

Yes, the poet has accurately noted that when it comes to depicting events in the mystery of our redemption, ordinary life is displaying itself, as the raw material for God’s saving work, “while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along.”

This year Chichester has its own version of nativity kitsch, brilliantly assembled by artists using the techniques of the 21st century to convey the mystery of the incarnation, the point at which time is intersected by eternity.

Under the general theme of heroes of the Covid-19 pandemic the actors in this installation bring their role in daily life and work to the part they play in the drama of the birth of Jesus Christ. Working in the NHS, with young people, with the hungry and with the homeless, and supporting the arts in the Festival Theatre and local communications, these players bring as their offering to the Christ child the story of their dedication, skill and generosity in this community today.

It is a solemn and sombre gift, as it expresses a response to the reality of death and the precarious uncertainty of the future, in the pandemic and in our new economic and political status. For all the exuberance of the depiction, this installation has echoes of the paintings in Berwick, also undertaken during days of dark uncertainty, with the threat of Nazi invasion, but also as Vanessa Bell was still coming to terms with the trauma of the bewildering suicide of her beloved sister, Virginia Woolf.

One of the great achievements of this amazing Chichester Nativity is that it has encouraged people to come into the cathedral just to look. And that, above all, is what we celebrate at Christmas. “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place,” say the shepherds. And what they see is summed up by St John’s gospel: “…and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”

The Chichester Nativity stands in a long tradition that sets the mystery of the presence of God in a local context, attended by people from roundabout, and viewed by those who know that locality and those people. It invites us to understand that the truth about the mystery of God revealed in Jesus Christ can only be fully apprehended locally, in the here and now, as in the longing and repeated cry in the carol, *In dulci jubilo*: “O that we were there”.

“Oh that we were there!” The Chichester Nativity tells us that we are there. This is Bethlehem because the intersection between time and eternity continues through the trajectory of history, sweeping the peoples of the earth in 2021 into its wake of hope and glory.

The Chichester Nativity inspires us to say, “We are there.” Today, the Christ child is born for us, here, in this Eucharist in which he claims our bread as his body and our wine and his blood. Today, in this Eucharist, we re-rehearse the claim that by sharing our death, Jesus Christ holds out the reality and the hope that we might share his life beyond the grave: “we shall see him, but in heaven, set at God’s right hand on high” as the carol puts it.

Yes, this Nativity scene inspires us not to look at ourselves or at each other but, because “we are there”, where Jesus is, it inspires us simply and only to look at him: God of God, light of light and to find a wisdom that will confound the greed and self-interest to which we are so easily prone.

Indeed, in looking at the crib, we discover that it has meaning, not because we are experiencing a pandemic and in need of comfort, but because the pandemic is posing questions to us about life, death, life beyond death, the reason why we exist, and how to shape a better world. And in the crib we see that the key answering those questions lies in the way that Jesus is born in obscurity, lives close to poverty, and suffers death at the hands of a tyrannical regime. In all of this he reveals the beauty of God’s relentless love, which brings each of us into existence and will not terminate the dialogue with our freedom until we choose to love him in return.

My hope and prayer is that this year the Christmas crib, in whatever form or style it comes, will inspire us to seek the wisdom with which to learn the lessons about accountability to each other and to our creator that this pandemic might teach us. Thank you to our COVID heroes who have led us to the crib: may the Christ child that we find and worship there lead us to freedom from fear and to the courage to live differently, because the likeness of God that we have seen in Jesus Christ is something we have also discovered in other people and in ourselves.