

Bishop of St Albans' Christmas sermon

St Albans Cathedral, 25.12.2019

Luke 2. 1-14

Christmas is the time in the year when even the most hardened cynic gets back in touch with their magical childhood memories. The weeks of preparation, the buying and wrapping of presents, the decoration of the tree, the smells of Christmas lunch all have the power to conjure up nostalgic feelings of excitement, anticipation, longing and belonging.

Down through the centuries Christians have invented various ways to reconnect the present to the past and bring the events of the first Christmas into the here and now.

As early as the 4th century, Saint Nicholas saved some girls from being sold into slavery by dropping a sack of gold coins through the window of their house so their father could pay for their dowries. His example began the tradition of exchanging gifts. Still today we give presents to one another as a symbol of God's greatest gift, Jesus Christ his Son.

Some centuries later, in 1223, Saint Francis of Assisi introduced the first nativity scene. He and his brothers decorated an abandoned cave, installed a real manger and tethered live animals to recreate a living tableau of the nativity for the townsfolk of Greccio in Italy.

Since the sixteenth century, Mexican Christians have celebrated the nativity in the Posada. Its origins lie in Conceptionist monks visiting each other's monasteries, carrying large statues of Joseph and Mary. They would knock on the massive wooden doors of the monasteries, crying out loud 'Do you have room for Christ?' The tradition persists today. As Advent draws to a close, people set out from their homes, bearing statues of the holy family. When they arrive at their neighbours, they knock on the door and ask 'Do you have room for Christ?' Then the doors are opened wide and they enter with the Holy Family.

When I was a child my village church held its carol service in a local barn, complete with live cattle in their stalls at the end of building adding their own unique contribution of sounds and smells to the readings and carols, with the newest born baby in the community taking pride of place, while usually crying incessantly throughout the entire service.

And now it seems as if lots of churches are joining in with the *Instant Nativity*, as happened here in the Abbey at the two crib services yesterday. Everyone is invited to arrive at church dressed up as a character from the first Christmas in Bethlehem. As a result, the entire congregation is made up of angels, shepherds and magi, numerous Josephs and Marys, a sprinkling of cows and sheep impersonators, the odd person turning up dressed as the star and even one or two less expected interlopers such as the Emperor Augustus and King Herod. I even heard of one person got the wrong end of the stick and turned up as a snowman! The Christmas events are told with audience participation. As one church put it 'It is disorganized, unrehearsed, low-budget chaos and most fun you can have whilst dressed as a shepherd, angel or star'.

It's tempting to poke fun at these different ways of celebrating Christmas but each one invites us to enter imaginatively into the experience of those events 2000 years ago. It's all too easy for our Christmas cards to idealise and sanitise the first nativity, not getting beyond the singing of 'Away in a Manger. There's nothing wrong with nostalgia, although as one person said, 'it ain't what it used to be'.

Within the Christian tradition we have a deeper understanding of remembering and memory, which goes way beyond nostalgia for a lost childhood. It draws on a concept whose origins lie in Jewish and Greek philosophy and which describes a different sort of remembering. The Hebrew word is *zikaron* and the Greek word in *anamnesis*.

This sort of remembering is about re-entering into the experiences of the past and using them to make sense of today. Anamnesis is what happens in the Eucharist when the priest uses the words of Christ at the consecration of the bread and wine. It starts in the past tense 'On the night before he died' and then within moments we find ourselves in the present tense 'Take and eat'. We re-live the past to change the present.

A true celebration of Christmas invites us to this sort of remembering. It takes us beyond nostalgia and propels us into engaging with the challenges of today's world. It's possible to re-enact events, or to pause and consciously use our imaginations, so that we reconnect with them and get in touch with the sheer earthiness and reality of it all and what it might mean for us living in today's world.

Think, for example, of the long and arduous journey which the teenage Mary, pregnant and vulnerable, is forced to make, travelling from the security of her home and family to Bethlehem where she is required to enrol in the census in the depth of winter. It's an image which conjures up pictures of young asylum seekers fleeing terror and seeking to find a haven where they can raise their children in safety. In a world where there are more than 65 million displaced people, Mary's story invites us to remember and pray for them and support them.

Pause and reflect on the lack of room in the inn. It doesn't take much effort to bring to mind the report by the charity Shelter, just three weeks ago, which estimated that around 135,000 children in this country will be spending Christmas in temporary accommodation. There will be people sleeping on the streets of our own city of St Albans. So this Christmas we remember them and pray for them and support them.

Then there is the slaughter of the Innocents when King Herod, in a fit of rage and fear, has all the young male infants under the age of two killed in and around Bethlehem. Such wanton slaughter is not far away from the plight of the millions of Uighur people in the Xinjiang Province of China who are being forcibly detained and 're-educated'. So this Christmas we remember them and pray for them and support them.

As we celebrate the birth of Christ in days of old, let us 're-member' the events – give those events new 'members', new arms and legs, so they can walk into our consciousness and inspire our actions as we join our song with angels and Christians throughout the world:

*The song of angels years ago to shepherds on the hills
was 'Peace on earth, goodwill to all' to heal man's many ills.
Come down to us this Christmas, Lord, come down, do not delay
help us bring peace and justice to your broken world this day.*

I wish you and all your family and friends a Happy Christmas and a peaceful and prosperous New Year.

+Alan St Albans