

Midnight Mass 2010

This year has been for me the year of the alternative nativity. One of the funniest was received by e mail - the whole story was told through the latest communication technology. The story begins with a google search and Mary e mails Joseph saying "We need to talk." Google maps are used to locate Bethlehem and Joseph purchases the only available transport - a donkey. They try to book a hotel on line of course but end up with Joseph sharing where he is on Facebook with a picture of a cow and a donkey and finally a baby in a crib. 15 348 people immediately say they like it. The Wise men buy their gifts on Amazon and the shepherds don't get a look in - presumably because they can't afford the technology.

I wonder what our modern day enquiries would make of the nativity. I can imagine Sarah Montague, on the Today programme, closely questioning Mary as to her understanding of virginity and angels; John Humphreys would express utter disgust at the council's preparations for the crowds coming into Bethlehem and the ensuing chaos, not to mention hardship, endured by some. Why, a baby was even born in a stable! We will know it happened because an under cover reporter from the Telegraph would have recorded it. Sky news might have caught on to the tension between the Magi and King Herod and the Magi would never have been able to go home another way without it being reported in the newspapers before hand. The shepherds, poor as they are, could finally up their standing in a society that despises them by selling their stories to the Sun. On a lighter note outfits for angels could be a major item in the Sunday Supplements. All this would miss the warmth of Christmas, the way it gets under our skin and changes things just a little.

I like the way we buy one another gifts at Christmas - spending a little time thinking of what the other would like. I like the smiles that pass between strangers. I like the "ahhh" of watching the youngsters acting out the nativity plays and the way they wave at their mums, or offer "custard to the king." I like to see conversations growing between adults who would normally turn their eyes the other way. I like the glow of children's faces in the candle light of Christingles and I like to hear people singing carols. I like the way people make a bit of an effort to brighten up our world with decorations

and lights, funny hats and ear rings. But above all I like to see the spirit of kindness.

The angels say to the shepherds

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

That's what it is in my head - good will toward people. Good will - what a wonderfully expressive word. Wishing goodness towards others. That is a double action - it is the act first of wanting what is good and second of wanting what is good for someone else. Turning away from self towards others. That is what I call kindness. Kindness has not gone away in our world. People are kind towards me - obviously scared when I walk down the hill in the icy weather! But there when I try digging a path for my car in the snow. I see acts of kindness all the time but what I am making a plea for is kindness in public life. We all need the example of kindness in order for it to continue and grow.

In sharp contrast to the warmth of the kindness I experience was Vince Cable being subject to deceit in that most democratic of institutions the constituency surgery. A place where trust is important transformed into a place of trickery. It was just another example of kindness being lost in public life for the sake of "truth" ; it was unkind to the man himself but it also threatens to undermine an institution where kindness has prevailed; the one to one help that constituents can get in confidence from their member of parliament.

In our public life we get examples of lying and deceit and blame; not good will but the will for what we can get out of others. I want the good will of the angels to really come back into fashion. I would love us to march for kindness - waving the word in bold letters on tall placards. I would love us to have T shirts with "kindness is cool" emblazoned across the front. I would love to see the news reporting the resilience of the human spirit and the kindness on people's hearts. Or maybe I simply want to hear the word more. Use it or lose it the saying goes.

There was another alternative nativity that has featured for me this year. It was the working out of the story shown at 7 pm every evening on BBC - available now on i player of course! The drama explored the story - the heartbreak Mary's pregnancy caused her family; the shouts of whore and the

sight of rocks being thrown at her; Josephs disgust and anger; the menace of Herod to the magi and the world; the anger of the down trodden shepherd against a God impervious to his sufferings. This is a story for adults. It is the story of God come to live among us in reality not tinsel town. It is our story - the explanation of how God can be born in each of our hearts because he loves each one of us beyond measure no matter where we are. So he grows inside, changes our shape, changes our direction, gives us the glow of new life. And among the things to be born to us is "good will towards men" - kindness. Let us wake up to that gift, unwrap it, use it and get it out there. Good will, kindness, God's love, for all.