

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Saturday 24th December 2016

Christmas Eve communion 6.30pm Rev Val Reid Isaiah 9: 2-7 Luke 2: 1-14 The last week of 2016.

“A lorry ploughs into a Christmas market in Berlin. Twelve people are killed, forty-nine injured. The Tunisian suspect, a failed asylum-seeker, is shot dead in Milan. The Russian ambassador, giving a speech in the Turkish capital Ankara, is assassinated by an off-duty policeman. The killer shouts that it is in revenge for Russian involvement in Aleppo.

This week’s events are not random incidents. They are linked to massive ongoing political stories. One centres on Syria. A country which gained its independence in 1946, but has struggled to live in peace as different ethnic, religious and political groups compete for power. Whose side are we on? It’s hard to know.

Hard-line government oppression in the face of the Arab Spring provoked rebellion. Government troops and rebel armies are each supported by foreign money and foreign arms. As always, it’s complicated.

People are being killed and cities are being destroyed. Civilians, as ever, are paying the price. Last week, at our nativity service, I asked the children of Hinde Street about the characters in the Christmas story. Who do they remind you of? The children of Aleppo, said Madeleine. But Syria is part of an even bigger story.

How do you make your voice heard on the world stage when you are under foreign occupation? What do you do if you are an outsider to power? Whether it is military or economic.

The lorry driver in Berlin. That other lorry driver in Nice in July. The man who murdered Jo Cox in Birstall in June.

People who felt alienated, helpless, angry, depressed. People who turned to violence to tell the world how desolate and furious and alone they felt. People who voted for Brexit, for Donald Trump, to express their frustration with the status quo. These things are not new.

Look back two thousand years. Luke begins his story of the birth of Jesus with a political outline of the world into which he was born. In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Of course Biblical scholars have spent millennia arguing about this statement. Somehow, Biblical scholars do love a good argument.

Augustus reigned until 14 CE, but never ordered a census. Herod ruled until 4 CE. Quirinius only became governor of Syria in 6 CE, when he conducted a local census in Judea. But it didn’t involve travelling to your home town. Just the usual Roman local bureaucracy.

So why does Luke tell this story? Why mention all these characters? Especially when the dates are so wrong. Was he just a poor journalist? A bit careless about his sources? I don’t think so. I think Luke knew what he was doing. And I think Luke wanted to say something profoundly important.

This pattern of setting his gospel stories in their political context is part of the shape of his writing. In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah... In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar – when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea – during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas – the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the desert... Everything has its framework. It's setting. It's very particular environment.

So Luke's birth story takes place in a world that is riven with politics. Quirinius was governor of Syria. At the time that Jesus is born, Syria is still a place that is struggling with political and military oppression.

Just as in last week's lectionary reading, Isaiah's sign to Ahaz about a girl who would have a child comes out of a political crisis. Syria again. Pressurising the king of Judah to enter into an alliance against the local superpower. Just as Syria is linked with this week's news.

It's Christmas Eve.

Tomorrow is Christmas Day.

Of all the great Christian festivals, isn't this about hope?

About light coming down into darkness? About angels with a message of peace? Why am I boring on about politics today of all days? Because Luke's message is about hope. It is about light coming down into darkness. It is about a message of peace. But it is most of all a question. Where do we look for light, for hope, for peace, in the political realities of our world? Because for Luke, it is not in politics that we will find our salvation. We don't look to our rulers, our politicians, our armies, or even our priests to transform our lives.

We look to a baby.

Luke begins with Caesar Augustus. Caesar Augustus was widely acclaimed in the Roman world as a bringer of peace. But real peace – the peace on earth announced by the angels – comes not from the might of Rome, but from the vulnerability of a tiny, refugee child.

The first people to hear about the birth in Bethlehem are not those in power – they are the outsiders, the despised shepherds, the ones without a voice in the affairs of state. Hope is found in the very small, the very ordinary, the very local. Hope is found on the very edge. Just as the shepherds are invited to make the journey to Bethlehem to see for themselves, so are we. There are many roads to Bethlehem.

Mary and Joseph travel there because they are caught up in the bureaucracy of Empire. The Shepherds are going about their ordinary, daily work, when they are interrupted by dramatic, heavenly revelation. But once we get there, what do we take away with us? Not the message that politics doesn't matter. Not that God is above all the stuff of the world – whether it's harrowing or whether it's ordinary.

Not that if you put your faith in the Christ-child, everything will be OK.

The fairy tale Christmas, the Christmas of so many of our cards and carols, is not what this story is about. Luke's story begins with a panoramic sweep across the world, and gradually narrows down to a single moment in time. A homeless, unmarried mother giving birth. An Empire, a country, a town, a stable, a baby. From global politics, to a single family, and then back into the way in which lives are

formed and shaped by what's going on in the world. This young family is forced to flee.

Mary, Joseph and their baby become refugees, in order to escape Herod's vindictive retaliation against the threat to his power. They travel to Egypt, just as the people of Israel did generations before. And then they head home when circumstances change. These stories of terror, of seeking asylum, of coming home again – these are timeless stories. We have read them week by week in our newspapers throughout 2016. And they go back to the beginning of time.

The identity of the people of Israel is shaped by their experience of slavery and freedom, exile and coming home. And I wonder if the identity of the son of God was shaped in this way too? Did the baby who began his life as an asylum seeker in a foreign land, grow up to become the preacher and teacher who always had time for the outcast, the stranger, the outsider?

And just as lives are formed by what's going on in the world, so the world can be transformed by a single life.

This week's news stories have highlighted the politics of 2016. In the same way, this year's obituaries have reminded us how individuals have shaped our thoughts and our culture. Leonard Cohen. Victoria Wood. Prince. David Bowie. Asa Briggs. Anita Brookner. Umberto Eco. Harper Lee. Sir Neville Marriner. Margaret Forster. Terry Wogan. Caroline Aherne. David Bowie. Alan Rickman.

High and low culture – not one of these people left their world unchanged in some way. The baby whose birth we celebrate tomorrow did not leave his world unchanged. But our faith is in – not a cultural idol who shaped our thinking, or our style, or our music, or our movie fantasies – but in the incarnate God. The God who shaped this world in creation, and who is still shaping it today. The God who moves and works through the local, the particular, the ordinary, the human. The God who works through us. And through us, if we are willing, might re-shape politics, re-shape the world. Amen.

Who would think that what was needed To transform and save the earth Might not be a plan or army, Proud in purpose, proved in worth? Who would think, despite derision, That a child should lead the way? God surprises earth with heaven, Coming here on Christmas Day.