

Read Archbishop Justin Welby's sermon preached at Canterbury Cathedral this morning:

Luke 2:1-20

The normal processes of life do not stop because we are celebrating Christmas; today 360,000 babies will be born, 151,000 people will die. Life in all its rawness continues to happen to people both far away and close to us, even if news-gathering slackens.

News does not stop but we choose to put aside those things which trouble us as much as possible. Sometimes we just look away, even from really important things; another series of pictures of barrel bombs in Aleppo, yet more information about killing in the South Sudan, the news from Berlin this week. And we look away. Especially when we want a peaceful and satisfying Christmas, unsullied by grim reality.

We all have a deep longing to be satisfied therefore intuitively we go for security, for the opportunity to focus inwards for a moment, and keep the world at bay. But satisfaction is not met by another gift or some more fine food, and it's not met by another gathering or technological experience. For security we need true life, glorious life, the life of God welling up and overflowing in glory.

That's what those shepherds found, glory. They saw glory in the angels in the sky and they found glory in the baby in the manger, and they returned to their cold hillside full of the glory of God. This was their encounter with the eternal, with the touch of God, the recognition of more than we can see or feel, and the certainty of the eternal. The angels sing of glory. God's glory is utterly tied up with this child. God has no glory apart from Jesus, and Jesus is the source of all that is truly glorious in life.

Glory comes to these shepherds and shines around them. They were economically poor, of no standing in the community and yet glory shines on them.

Throughout the bible glory shines in places and on people where it is least expected. God reveals glory to those from whom many turn away.

Today, through the birth of Christ, God turns to us as he did towards the shepherds. We may not turn away, but so often Jesus becomes part of the Christmas trimmings. To pass by the manger in which is found God's glory is to travel towards uncertainty.

The end of 2016 finds us all in a different kind of world, one less predictable and certain, which feels more awash with fear and division.

Governor of the Bank of England Mark Carney said three weeks ago, "Despite immense progress many citizens in advanced economies are facing heightened uncertainty... rather than a new golden era, globalisation is associated with low wages, insecure employment, stateless corporation and striking inequalities."

That uncertainty of our world, our feelings tells us that our values are in the wrong place. I learned last week of a family in one of our cities who lowered their child in a supermarket dustbin to scavenge for food before fishing him out. What will that family eat today?

Economic progress, technological progress, communication progress hasn't resulted in economic justice. It hasn't delivered glory for us

It is amongst those on the edge, those ignored, and amongst persecuted believers that I have most clearly seen the glory of God this year, a glory that chases away the fear of terror, the power of death, and the economies of injustice, and presents a path to a more just, more Christ-like world.

Let me tell you about a bomb injured woman in Pakistan that Caroline and I met six weeks ago, bereft of her youngest child in the blast that had injured her, who said, "One thing we know, Jesus really is the good Shepherd."

And a lonely elderly woman in London, and a trafficked teenager in Watford both of whom spoke recently at a Carol service at Lambeth Palace: they have seen the glory of God in Jesus and he has brought powerful transformation to their lives. People on the edge.

How then do WE find glory? The only place and person who can bring glory to us is the child of Bethlehem who became the victim on the cross.

Time and again in his story, Luke tells us it is in this setting that there is glory, glory, glory. For God has come among his people to bring Salvation. Glory revealed - because in receiving this gift we receive true life. Glory revealed- because in coming to him our deepest longings and greatest needs are met. Glory revealed - because the birth of this child heralds peace on earth. Here and here alone there is true hope, utter certainty.

For One has come who rules by love not by force, who commands forgiveness not revenge, who makes the last first and the first last, who becomes the victim of violence and hatred in achieving peace. This baby is a great challenge to every power and authority; from his first hours when Herod acts in murderous rage to his last hour when the Roman ruler sentences him to death those with authority seek to eliminate the challenge of Jesus. Jesus will never be co-opted to any office or power.

To participate in this glory we must respond to this child and respond to those to whom this child came. We cannot pray that we might be given our daily bread, while not caring that there are those today who will have no bread. In our own country whilst many will go to sleep tonight too full, there are also many who will go to sleep hungry.

In faithfulness to the glory of the Baby in the manger we are all called to show the glory of God with generous hearts and overflowing love, yet we feel overwhelmed with a world in which every need is brought to our attention by the power of modern systems. What God calls for from us is not a universal answer but a simple obedience by each of us.

Like the shepherds none of us can do much, but the angel does not say to them “solve the problems of war torn Palestine under the Romans”, but “go to Bethlehem”. Our response to the child in the manger is not to solve the problems of the world, but to do what we can do, with our resources, in our time, at the age and with the capacity we have.

That capacity is liberated when it is centred on Jesus. In faithfulness to the glory of the Baby in the manger we are all called to respond to this child with unlimited devotion, in worship and awe. Then, whoever, wherever we are, we see the glory of God, perhaps at first a faint glow and distant song, but at the end of all things light beyond imagining and the chant of all the angels. We begin a journey which ends as part of that glory in which there is one glorious vision, one eternal certainty, one great assembly in glorious joy.

5 min read

Source URL: <https://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/archbishop-canterburys-christmas-sermon>