

Read Archbishop Justin's sermon for the Whitehall Carol Service, which was read by the Dean of Westminster Abbey, the Very Reverend Dr David Hoyle.



Christmas is such a busy time of year. For lots of you who have jobs that don't stop when the holidays start it might be an even busier time than normal as you keep the services that this country relies on going.

With busy-ness often comes complication and confusion. Have I bought all the right presents? Whose family should we go to this year?

When we have questions, we often rely on the advice of others. When we're faced with unprecedented situations, as you have all been burdened with over the last couple of years, we seek counsel – whether that's from civil servants, or scientists, or other politicians, or even our own families – as we try and work out what the right thing to do is, often amid a cacophony of noise. In your jobs you face the bizarre and the banal – never knowing what might happen on an individual day - and try and find solutions to all alike.

Our readings today talk a lot about counsel – both good and bad. Eve, of course, on the advice of the serpent, contrary to the command of God, eats the apple with dire consequences.

The shepherds follow the advice of the angels and find Christ in his manger; the magi simply follow the star. All of these characters, throughout the Bible, seeking answers in the midst of messy lives, searching for truth in the confusion, and caught up between the light and the darkness.

I wonder what sort of advice King Herod took. Picture him, in his palace, suddenly interrupted by three kings - three foreigners no less - claiming they have followed a star to find the real king of the Jews, the messiah! It always feels typical when you're the last person to hear about a problem.

We read in Matthew that he 'called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.' It's a bit like the Ancient Near East version of a COBRA meeting – 'how are we going to deal with this urgent new threat' – except it sounds like all the people present agreed: Bethlehem was the appointed place, as foretold by scripture.

What other conversations might have happened between Herod and his advisors go unrecorded. But I like to imagine the confusion they might have felt – ‘the king of the Jews?! Some baby in a stable? A virgin birth!? A likely story.’ But still, any threat to the king was a threat, so Herod orders every baby under two to be killed.

In a way though, their confusion would have been right. What God would come as child rather than as warrior? What kind of almighty king would be poor and helpless? In-keeping with our theme of counsel, some of you may have read C.S Lewis’ ‘The Screwtape Letters’, in which a senior demon instructs a junior demon in guiding a man towards damnation and away from God, whom they call ‘the Enemy’. One piece of advice is thus - ‘Jargon, not argument, is your best ally in keeping [people] from the Church’.

It’s a satirical book, a Christian polemic, and it works by looking at faith through the other end of the telescope, by shifting the perspective a full 180.

And that’s sort of what God does in Jesus Christ – he calls us to radically shift our perspectives, the ideas we hold onto and value so tightly, like power, status, wealth, background, age and race, and replaces them with Jesus. It turns the world upside down and inside out, and we have to look at it in a completely new way.

Herod was overtaken somewhat by what Harold Macmillan would have called ‘events, dear boy’. But everyone here knows what it’s like to end up in situations we never wanted to be in, caught up between a rock and a hard place.

Life is complicated. Let us make it simple – simple enough that a child might understand.

At Christmas, we remember and celebrate the God who comes to us to show us what God is like, to guide us, to comfort us and – above all – to redeem us. It means we can look at life in a completely new way.

Our reading in Isaiah today also speaks of counsel:

‘A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him— the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord’

Just as Herod’s advisors knew from scripture the messiah should be born in Bethlehem, here the scripture points towards the fruit of Jesse – ancestor of David and the foretold Messiah. He will bear the Spirit of wisdom, of understanding, of counsel and might’.

It’s not about providing the perfect day or buying the best gifts. You don’t have to have brilliant photos on your social media or cook a 12-course tasting menu. You do not have to be perfect this Christmas. Because the only thing that is perfect – the only thing we need to be perfect – is Jesus.

The only one who offers true, perfect, untainted counsel and wisdom is God.

In prayer, in quiet contemplation, in faithful Christian life, we can deepen our relationship with that Messiah, hear his word and follow his call on our lives.

It need be no more complicated this Christmas than to rest for a moment in quiet adoration of the Christ child.

Amen

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