

At a Carol service last week I met Mary Berry. She was a delight, and it was a privilege to meet her. The conversation was going so well – I can bluff even when it comes to Bake Off - until the person next to me spoiled it ever so slightly by saying "Justin has never watched a single complete episode of Bake Off."

To give her credit she recovered very well. "Why not?" she asked. And I answered that although the cooking was fascinating to me, I could not stand the moment when people get sent home. They look brave, and hug and all that, but what a blow! In front of millions they are being defined as not quite having made the grade.

None of us like being defined by others, but certain things mean that we cannot take part without accepting that the event will define us, even if only as having a soggy bottom on our cake. Participation will define us.

In the events of Jesus birth, Herod and the shepherds are defined by their response to Jesus. Today, we are each defined by our response to Jesus. Even more extraordinarily, Christmas defines God. Here is the most startling of claims; this baby, this Jesus, who is God, defines God. God is self-defined as pure love, love celebrated in angel light and seen in human vulnerability, love that is indifferent to status, and that hates injustice, love the news of which is borne on the heavenly songs, but which is seen in poverty and insecurity.

What the shepherds glimpsed that silent night outside Bethlehem was an apocalypse, which means an uncovering of God's final purpose for all the universe.

The shepherds were the poorest of the poor, out on cold hillsides day and night. They probably weren't religious people. They certainly weren't powerful, influential people. They were the butt of jokes, the object of contempt and the outsiders. They were unlikely to consider themselves on a journey in search of meaning and personal fulfilment.

Yet to them the angels flew, not for private experience but for public declaration. They told of a once-for-all event that shifted the entire world, the whole creation. This event wasn't just to be observed from far off, it was close, inviting, a God-for-them apocalypse, an event in which they are invited to participate. And they did.

Today, across the Middle East, close to the area in which the angels announced God's apocalypse, ISIS and others claim that this is the time of an apocalypse, an unveiling created of their own terrible ideas, one which is igniting a trail of fear, violence, hatred and determined oppression.

Confident that these are the last days, using force and indescribable cruelty, they seem to welcome all opposition, certain that the warfare unleashed confirms that these are indeed the end times. They hate difference, whether it is Muslims who think differently, Yazidis or Christians, and because of them the Christians face elimination in the very region in which Christian faith began. This apocalypse is defined by themselves and heralded only by the angel of death.

The shepherds see the truth, eternal, unwavering, divine truth, defined not by them, but by God: it was truth for them then, it is truth with us today. Goodness knows what they were expecting, but what they find is a new-born child – tiny, helpless and vulnerable. Yet they bow down in worship. The shepherds get this apocalypse.

Herod too gets this apocalypse. He senses that this tiny, helpless, vulnerable, utterly normal child is the ultimate threat to his power and authority. He is right: this child is the ultimate judge of all human power and authority. Having heard about the birth of Jesus, Herod responds in devastating destruction. He tries to annihilate the apocalypse of God. Force meets love, and love has to flee into Egypt and returns to ordinary life and eventually to a cross and an empty tomb, conquering the world. At Christmas we are confronted with God's form of power, which judges all our forms of power.

The powerful, by their response, define themselves. Isaiah addresses that very point in our Old Testament reading. We often skip the middle verses because they are uncomfortable sounds at Christmas. To the people of Israel, Isaiah was pointing to the destruction of their oppressors, to God's defining judgement on those who brutalise the poor, who set a yoke of oppression. For as the poet-priest Malcolm Guite says,

But every Herod dies, and comes alone/to stand before the Lamb upon the throne.

To all who have been or are being dehumanised by the tyranny and cruelty of a Herod or an ISIS, a Herod of today, God's judgement comes as good news, because it promises justice. As Isaiah makes clear, God's judgement is one piece of a bigger story of salvation – God's apocalypse of love – which declares, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given".

To all Herods this innocent baby is a threat, a sign of God's radical reimagining of power – through love.

To the shepherds, he is a gift, and an invitation.

Herod and the shepherds recognise the significance of this child, yet they respond very differently. We too are defined, by our response to this child. God allows us the freedom to reject him, or, in our own vulnerability, to kneel and worship the child who is given, the true apocalypse, who unveils God.

Jesus sets the benchmark for God's dealing with the tyranny and cruelty of our world, for He is the Prince of Peace. We do not deny tyranny and cruelty, we do not compete with it: rather, we overcome as we allow ourselves to be defined by God's true unveiling, transformed by His invading love.

It is this true apocalypse that we are confronted with at Christmas. It is news of God's purposes for the world God made and sustains, purposes which are better than we can imagine. This apocalypse, this unveiling, judges every world power, reaches out to every displaced people group, every refugee, every single human heart. It begins with ourselves. Both our means and our ends must meet the standard God sets for us here.

The shepherds went and worshipped. Herod sought to kill. Today's Herods, ISIS and the like around the world in so many faiths, propose false apocalypses. But you and I are called to respond in worship and transforming, world changing obedience, both as individuals, and together, to this revelation of the baby that defines God, for it is our response to Jesus that defines us.

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