

Read the Archbishop of Canterbury's Christmas sermon preached at Canterbury Cathedral.

Luke 2:1-7

We are drawn to stories of freedom and purpose. In Star Wars an abandoned orphan on a desert planet turns into a knight leading the struggle for freedom. Platform 9 and three quarters takes Harry Potter into a world of magic and purpose.

Not so in the gospel stories, even those of Christmas. Yes, the shepherds see angels. Yes, Mary and Joseph have dreams and are chosen as special people.

Yet after the moments of miracles life goes on almost as before - the shepherds return to their sheep, Joseph settles back as a carpenter, Mary raises children. They flee as refugees, like over 60 million people today. Yet their story is the beginning of ours, it is an invitation to lives of freedom, found through God's freely offered love.

Delivering freedom is usually seen as the role and the promise of political leaders. The French philosopher Rousseau famously started his book on the social contract by writing, *"Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains"*. But he goes on and sets out the problem that besets all offerings of freedom: *"One man thinks himself the master of others, but remains more of a slave than they are."*

In the manger is something completely different from all human strivings for freedom. The baby in the manger is a paradox from the first breath he draws in his mother's arms to the last cry he utters on the cross. He is power seen in humility, and He offers freedom expressed in loving service.

It is this Christly paradox of freedom springing from the overflowing of love that leads to salvation, to the common good and human flourishing. There is no power in the universe stronger than God's love and it is directed towards the liberation of human beings.

This liberation begins with the risky, counter-intuitive birth of God in the form of a baby of a teenage single mother, in a poor family in a war-torn country ruled by an infant slaughtering, family murdering psychopath. Jesus' life continues mostly in obscurity and appears to end in betrayal, abandonment and humiliating execution.

Even Jesus' brief periods of fame, of celebration and decisive action look like God's apparent mistakes. An host of angels appears to a bunch of shepherds. Shepherds were the low life in those days – the butt of many jokes. They were armed, used to fighting, lived rough and were often untrustworthy. Bethlehem is less than ten miles from Jerusalem, the angels could have announced the Messiah to the important and influential just down the road. Instead a bunch of shepherds confuse the sheep by leaving them, frighten the town police by entering Bethlehem, surprise a mother who was probably, having just given birth, not entirely in the mood for entertaining, and then return. One could be forgiven for thinking that this was a good plan badly executed.

Yet this is no mistake, but the greatest plan there ever could be, because this baby is the way God calls us to relationship with Him, to lives of purpose and to being witnesses that God is with us.

The manger offers a compelling invitation to life. Each year at Christmas we have a guest Carol service at Lambeth Palace. We hear from those who have recently begun to find the life Jesus offers. They come from all sorts of places, from people who have been trafficked into slavery to people who have known only power. Their stories of responding to the invitation of the manger born baby are the best part of my year.

Not only is the manger an invitation to life, but of life abundant, full and free. Mary is the second of God's beautiful apparent mistakes. Surely, God should have chosen someone accustomed to the demands of a political life? Yet in Mary we see the kind of life that is ours when we accept the invitation of God. It is abundant, suffering, dramatic, but above all a life of fulfilling freedom. This divine-human leader Jesus does not subdue, or diminish His followers, but enables them to be all that a human being could be, to be truly liberated.

This self-emptying, helpless, stable born baby who is God has brought and continues to bring more freedom than all earth's most powerful leaders. The nature of those who have power is to seek to hold onto it. In 2017 we have seen around the world tyrannical leaders that enslave their peoples, populist leaders that deceive them, corrupt leaders that rob them, even simply democratic, well intentioned leaders of many parties and countries who are normal, fallible human beings. We have experienced across our country terrorism that kills the innocent, claiming that it is the path to freedom in God.

The nature of God who has all power, and from whom all power comes, is to lay it aside for love's sake and thus without fear, force or manipulation to offer true freedom for every human being. God is showing all truth in its completest form, all love in its purest aspect, the true light of freedom all wrapped up in the baby in Bethlehem.

The light needed witnesses at the beginning and needs them to this day. It is the calling of every Christian to be a witness to the light, in word and deed, in all circumstances.

In Coventry Cathedral is one of my favourite pictures, the Stalingrad Madonna. It was drawn on paper in charcoal on Christmas Day 1942, 75 years ago, by a German medical officer under siege from the advancing Russian armies near Stalingrad. It shows Mary huddled against the terrible cold, holding Jesus, sheltered, to her cheek. Round her are the words "*Licht, leben, Liebe*" (Light, Life, love). Christ offers life of true freedom in love, in the darkest places his light shines. Every human being is invited to share that life and freedom. Christians are its witnesses.

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