

It's a wonderful life

Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-14

Easy Christmas favourite film to guess – which one do you think it is? On Christmas Eve, 1945, in Bedford Falls, USA, George Bailey is suicidal. George had founded a loan company which, generously, gave out loans to 'the little people' to help them with housing, or business, or with their personal lives. He was the exact opposite of Scrooge. He shared with generosity; he welcomed and helped whenever he could, often at great personal cost to his own hopes and dreams. He faced constant opposition from a rival, and when George's company faced an accidental financial crisis, George is told that he's worth more dead than alive. On Christmas Eve 1945 he stands on a bridge, determined to end it all. *"Dear Father in heaven: I'm not a praying man, if you're up there, show me the way, show me the way, I'm at the end of the road."* Prayers for George reach heaven, and Clarence Odbody, Angel 2nd Class, is assigned to save George in order to earn his angel wings. Before George can jump, Clarence jumps into the river and George jumps in after him to rescue him, and so the story unfolds.

Got the film yet? "It's a Wonderful Life" – of course.

It's a story with many meanings, pointing to more than just the story itself. The film shows us how important all lives are, and that each one of our lives, great or small, easy or difficult, filled with sunshine or filled with darkness, contributes something to someone, and often far more than we ever know.

Clarence Odbody (Angel 2nd Class), George's guardian angel shows George's life in flashbacks. How he saved his brother's life in an accident, the brother who in the War shot down a kamikaze plane that was on its way to bomb amphibious transport – if the brother hadn't been saved, many lives would have been lost; how people who had been helped by George to build homes, and get out of debt and trouble, suffered more because George wasn't there to help them; how his mother would have been forced to struggle with life because George wasn't there to help her; how his uncle, a little confused in life, would have been institutionalised because

George wasn't there to help him. So many people helped, and more than just those directly affected by George's kindness and courage, who would have struggled and maybe gone under because George wasn't there to help them. Clarence says: "You've been given a great gift, George. A chance to see what the world would have been without you. Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he's not here he leaves quite a hole... You see George, you really had a wonderful life."

George goes home, to find that his family, his friends, and town has clubbed together and sorted out the financial problem. A bell on the Christmas tree rings, and George's daughter remembers that every time a bell rings, an angel has just earned his wings.

I have sometimes wondered, in my darker moments, what the world would have been like if people around me hadn't been around, or if I hadn't been around. When life was tough, and problems mounted, and there looked like there was no way ahead. On this Christmas Eve, I wonder if any of us could imagine if the person of Jesus had never been around. Would the world have been a better place without Him?

If there was no Jesus, and therefore no Christianity, would there have been no Crusades? Would there have been no Inquisition? Would there have been no sexism, or homophobia, or anti-Semitism, or Islamophobia, or paedophilia? I fear humanity would have found other means to persecute the stranger, oppress the minorities, exclude those who were different, harm those who were vulnerable. I believe it is not faith in Jesus that causes the problem; it is misunderstanding what Jesus is about and what He came to do that causes the grief.

If there was no Jesus, I can only see the countless lives that would not have been touched and transformed by His example of kindness and love and generosity of spirit. Kindness and love goes beyond Christianity, but I look around and see the difference that the presence, the reality of Jesus has made and know that if He had not been here, the hole in humanity would be immense. I believe that the world would be a little darker, a little colder, a little less friendly, a little less filled with the possibility and challenge that even in the worst of times, there is the inspiration and challenge to do and to be better. I believe that if there was no Jesus, if He had

never been around, then there would be a lot less hope and encouragement to keep on keeping on.

That this is the point of the wonderful Christmas story. God, knowing how tough, rotten, painful, grim life could be, sends light and encouragement and challenge and love to help us get through and to make a difference. That each one of our lives, individually, like links in a great chain, will make a difference. I look at the lights on our Christmas tree, and see little pin-pricks of light joined up, making something of beauty that lifts the heart. That's what every good community looks like. For me, that's what happens when we understand the Christmas story: light joins light; hope joins hope; love joins love. Our lives matter and make a difference. We are not alone.

Last week a friend of mine died, and at her funeral the story was told of how she, as a decent Christian, was in Edinburgh one Festival time. Walking through the Grassmarket, she and her husband were going back to their car when they saw a man sprawled across the pavement outside the Salvation Army hostel. They stepped around them, and went on their way home. On the journey back Jane became upset, and hit the dashboard of her car with her hand. "There's more to this Christian thing than stepping around the problems in life." She promised that she would never step around difficult things again, but step forward. In her life, she helped a heroin addict find hope; she helped Romanian orphans find hope; she helped homeless people find hope. She knew it wasn't all about her; it was because she was one link in a chain of light. She knew that her life was making a difference, in small or in great ways. She knew that she was inspired to do this by the example of Jesus, Whose birth we celebrate at Christmas. She knew that her life too was a 'wonderful life', and she stepped forward to live it.

Our lives matter, and the way we live them. They will not be perfect; there will be stumbles and falls along the way; there will be plenty of people to point out our faults. But this Christmas Eve, as it turns into Christmas Day, we celebrate the wonderful life of Jesus, and the wonderful life He offers to us: to be light, to be laughter, to be love. It is, truly, a wonderful life. Live it this Christmas time, and in the days to come, and make a difference for good in your world.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen