

Morningside Watchnight Sermon 11.30pm 24/12/18

No Room

Luke 2:1-20

Last year I travelled around the country and the world as Moderator of the General Assembly. I stayed in many different places. An ambassador's residence, a Highland hotel, Oxford and Cambridge colleges, an occasional palace, the officers' mess at Sandhurst, and a castle or two. There was always room. At the beginning of Jesus' life, there was no room, but space was found.

In January of this year I was in Israel-Palestine and Jordan, and stayed a Jerusalem guesthouse, a hotel on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and finally in Amman where I was a guest of the King of Jordan. Everyone greeted me with a gracious bow and the deepest of curtsies. Fortunately it's like that all the time in Morningside so I was well used to these niceties. There was a tense night in a bullet-pocked hotel in Gaza wondering if the electricity would stay on, or missiles and shells would fly through the air.

Wherever I stayed there was always room. But on Christmas Eve, we remember how it started for Jesus. There was no room in the inn, but space was found.

I visited Borderline, a charity closely linked to the Church of Scotland in London. Did you know that vulnerable, isolated and far from home Scots, going south to look for jobs, make up 12% of the UK homeless population in London? No room, that's how Jesus started, but space was found.

In Glasgow the Lodging House Mission has over 100 years of serving homeless women and men. It's a Christian organisation with a mission to provide care and support to those in need, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity or gender. No room at the inn, that's how Jesus started, but space was found.

Recent statistics show that, despite saying resolving homelessness and more importantly its root causes is never far from what politicians want to do, it's churches and charities that

continue to provide the most significant support: with food and finance, and by paying attention and making space.

Last week whilst the Brexit pantomime played out in the Houses of Parliament, a rough sleeper died hours after he was found unresponsive in an underpass across the road. No room at the inn – that’s how Jesus started, but space was found.

Last Christmas Day I volunteered in a Crisis centre. Volunteers provided more than hot food and drinks. There were hairdressers, a podiatry service, counselling services, medical help, clothing and clothes-mending, new footwear available. This year they’re hoping to provide a vet to help care for the animals of homeless people. I wasn’t sure what I could do. Then I went to a large upstairs hall and found out what I could offer. Many of the homeless women and men in the hall told me what they missed most at Christmas. Not just food and drink and the warmth and safety of a home. It was playing board games, and someone to listen and to pay attention.

I could listen to the story of Michael, and how tough times and the death of loved ones left him, at 83, without a home. What he really missed, sleeping rough on the streets, was keeping clean, and having someone to talk to when he was feeling low. Christmas reminded him of his grandfather who used to read poetry to him. So I read poetry to him.

I could listen to the story of Molly, a young woman traumatized by a series of bad and abusive relationships. The Christmas shelter was one of the few places she could find it possible to trust someone, but even there it took her time. She missed her mother, who used to brush her little girl’s hair each night. I took her to the hairdresser, who gently washed Molly’s hair, dried it and brushed its tangles out.

I could go on, for I was there for hours. Listening to lives broken by alcohol and drug misuse; endemic poor mental health issues. So few pay attention. So few look and listen. No room at the inn was where Jesus started, but space was found.

There was no room at the inn for Jesus, but space was found. Schooled as we are by medieval visions of Christmas, with an overlay of Gothic Victoriana, the *Bible* account of Jesus’ birth is remarkably sparse. We hear it read every year, but do we listen to its simplicity. Hang on to your

pews, but there's no donkey mentioned in the Christmas story. Despite my favourite Christmas joke: how did Mary and Joseph get their Christmas shopping home from the supermarket? On a Lidl Donkey.

The wise men: we don't know how many of them there were. Only three gifts mentioned, but there could have been a dozen of them clubbing together. They have no names in the Bible.

At the heart of it all – is the inn. Yes, there was no room for Jesus in the inn, which would have been crowded. But in the typical one room Palestinian home, not dissimilar to crofts in the Scottish Highlands a couple of centuries ago, there would have been room for Jesus, and Mary and Joseph. The host family who will have squeezed them in, for such is the unspoken but real practice of Palestinian hospitality then and now to 'family' and strangers. The animals would have sheltered at the far end of the same room. The manger, not a wooden crib, a dug out hollow in the earthen floor where the hay was put. And there, **there**, room was found for Jesus.

No room in the inn, but space was found for Jesus that first Christmas.

How does that play tonight? No room in austerity Britain for the homeless, despite money being spent by Governments north and south of the border, on this most fixable of problems. The problem isn't simply the lack of room, it's the lack of space society gives to those who don't fit in, and often whose poor mental health make them complex to handle, but that makes them no less children of God. Nor are they all homeless, the ones for whom there is no room.

On this Christmas Eve, with a US President sulking behind his unfinished, un-Christian wall; with the barrier-building Brexit at impasse after an unholy time in Parliament; with Universal Credit causing significant difficulty for the poorest and most vulnerable in our land – who else are we in danger of saying, 'no room' in our society? Where must space be found, even if sacrifice must be made?

Watchnight sermons won't change worlds, but they might, just might, change individuals. If you believe that in our angst-ridden, ill-tempered, narrow-visioned world that this is not what you signed up to when you became a part of the human race, then maybe, just maybe, in the story of the infant for whom there was no room at the inn, but for whom space was made, you might

begin to find your answer. In His life of generous inclusion, in His teaching of mercy and forgiveness, in His example of unfiltered love, the Christ-child of Bethlehem points a way to people of all faiths and none to realise that when we think there is no room, we still have to find space. Space for compassion and understanding; space for noticing and paying attention to the people around us. Space to listen and not to speak all the time. Space to include, and not to turn away.

We won't get it right all the time, but maybe, in this sacred space, where you have time to stop, and wonder, and listen, maybe the time has come for you to make some space, even a little space, for the Christ-child tonight, and to travel with Him in the year that lies ahead.

The American theologian and civil rights leader Howard Thurman wrote:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

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

Amen