

Morningside

Sermon

11.30pm

24/12/23

Watchnight

Jesus in the rubble

Luke 2:1-20

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem in the West Bank, part of Palestine-Israel is a sacred site for the two and a half billion Christians. It is said to be built on top of the cave where Christians believe Jesus was born.

Normally, there would be thousands of people filing into and out of the church. You would normally go in through a door that is about four foot high, you almost have to bow as you go in. Tonight, the Church is empty. One of the world's oldest churches is a casualty of one of the longest running conflicts.

Manger Square, right outside the church, is traditionally the focal point of Christmas celebrations. Due to the conflict in Gaza, Christmas festivities in Bethlehem have been cancelled. No tree, no lights, no nativity scene.

But there will be at least one nativity scene. In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem they have constructed a disjointed nativity scene surrounded by rubble.

All the wooden figures usually close around the crib are separated by stone rubble. Shepherds and angels, wise men and camels, the ox and the donkey, trying to see where in the rubble where the baby might be. He is found in the middle of the rubble. The wooden manger shattered shards around Him. Wrapped in scraps of cloth, a tiny light hidden behind Him. If it wasn't there, you'd probably miss Him under the rubble.

The pastor in the Lutheran Church has said, "In Gaza today, God is under the rubble. He is in the operating room. If Christ were to be born today, He would be born under the rubble. We see His

image in every child killed, or more hopefully pulled from the rubble. In every child in an incubator, if the incubators still work." Gaza is only 45 miles from Bethlehem.

Five years ago I visited Israel-Palestine, and Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities. Relationships then were tense, but workable, and the majority favoured peaceable relationships, some even 'refusing to be enemies' with people who were their neighbours. The Hamas and Israeli Defence Service actions have shattered this and in a climate of fear and distrust on both sides, both communities despair of peace, along with the rest of the world. But many still work for it. Despite what is going on, because of what is going on, they work. Where would Jesus be born today? In the rubble.

I visited a hospital in Gaza, which is partly funded by the Church of Scotland. I was taken to a ward where young children, around the age of 8, had been taken for psychological therapy after the trauma of the effect of bombing and bullets five years ago. We watched the medical staff help the unnaturally quiet children talk, and draw, and begin to address some of their mental health issues. It was very upsetting to watch. At the end of the session the children were gathered in front of a screen. They sat to watch a short film, where children were laughing and clapping. I asked the psychologist what was going on. "We're teaching these children how to laugh." Teaching 8-year olds to laugh. Where would Jesus be born today? Under the rubble.

The rubble of Gaza; the rubble of the southern Israeli homes and a music concert where innocents were murdered by Hamas; the rubble of towns Ukraine; the rubble of South Sudan and Yemen. The rubble of Afghanistan. The rubble of bereft homes in Prague after the gun attack. A home is not just bricks and mortar; it is hopes and dreams and young lives, and old ones, shattered by an act of madness.

You don't have to look far in our own country to see the metaphorical rubble of homelessness; or fuel poverty; or the rise of Foodbank use; or Edinburgh Clothing Store use; or all the other charities, hard-pressed for cash, trying to remind humanity about its need, still, to be human. Where would Jesus be born today? Under the rubble.

"Birth takes place when the baby is strong enough to live outside the womb, but small enough to make its escape. It's an astonishing, sometimes harrowing, almost always dumbfounding experience. Just look at those tiny toes, that scrunched up face. But it's early days. The baby can't feed itself for years, can't wash its own clothes until its thirties, and isn't financially independent, well, when is that now?

I want to stay with the vulnerability of the new-born baby... In 2019 in a Russian city 900 miles southeast of Moscow, a block of flats collapsed following a gas explosion. Rescuers searched amid the debris in temperatures as low as -20C. Frequently they had to halt their search while workers tried to remove or stabilize sections of the building in danger of collapse. Eventually, after 35 hours of searching, they heard cries. They found a tiny baby boy and pulled him from the rubble. The regional governor then said an extraordinary thing. 'The child was saved because it was in a crib and wrapped warmly.'

Christmas Eve is a moment of great wonder. It is a night when a new baby is wrapped in swaddling clothes. Tiny, defenceless, the odds already stacked against Him. Soon Herod would come to have Him killed, but He escaped. Soon He would be, with His family, a refugee, fleeing southward to Egypt, maybe even passing through the ancient city of Gaza.

If Jesus were a superhuman hero, why go through all the hassle? Why not arrive in Galilee, fully grown, good to go? But God becomes flesh as the most vulnerable little person imaginable, at the mercy of inexperienced parents, clumsy animals, dangerous buildings, unwashed shepherds,

noisy angels, and a paranoid King Herod. How vulnerable can you get? It's a miracle Jesus reached the age of one.

We like the soft-focus nativity scene of our hopeful imagination, but the reality of what surrounded that story is tougher. It drives us to rage at God's apparent inaction in the face of building collapse, abandoned children, global pandemics, intractable warfare in a land we ironically call 'Holy'. Perhaps we still picture God as elderly, wise, bearded, white-robed...stuck to a gilded ceiling... What the Christmas story shows us is a God Who is none of these things. All the things we thought we trusted or dismissed about God – they all fall away on Christmas Eve.

We say to God, 'I hate the fact that You can control everything, but You still let bad things happen.' God says, 'I'm a helpless baby before your eyes.' We say, "I hate the way You're so powerful and mighty and You justify all the ways of power and privilege and force that dominate the world and dictate who can thrive and who will suffer.' God says, 'I'm a tiny infant, as vulnerable to rejection and hatred and neglect as you are.' We say, 'I hate all the chances I've missed, and the odds stacked against me and how my life's never going to come out right or be happy.' God says, 'Here I am, I'm a child in your arms. The future of everything is in your arms.'

On Christmas Eve God in Jesus is born under the rubble. A fragile, utterly defenceless baby. Not some superhero. What if this is what God really looks like? What if God is so longing to be in relationship with us that the central image of that relationship is of God longing to be embraced by us, made warm by us, cradled by us. So much so that, if we don't respond, the future of everything, and all the kindness, love, challenge, peace Jesus came to teach, is in jeopardy? God risking absolutely everything to be cradled in our arms.

The wonder of Christmas is that God trusts us with His Son, placing Jesus in our hands, and asks us to work with Him to make things better, so that some things will still be all right. When His

love, and our love, fuse together, and the rubble of today might yet become the building blocks of tomorrow.

That is the good news of Christmas, the joy of Christmas, the peace of Christmas, the hope of Christmas, the love of Christmas. This Christmas Eve, and now, this Christmas Day.ⁱ

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

Amen

ⁱ *Inspired by Samuel Wells, The Moment of Truth*