

24th Dec 2023

Midnight Communion: This is how God is....

There aren't many fields now around Bethlehem, and very few sheep in evidence, other than the snow-white fluffy lambs, carried by fresh-faced and costumed shepherds, who meet and greet each coach when it arrives at Shepherd Fields, and are all ready to be photographed with you, for a fee...

We went, last June, to Shepherds' Fields, where you can scramble down the terraced rocky hillside, look over to Bethlehem, and gather in one of the natural caves which were the shepherds' huts, offering a little shelter from wind and rain.

We walked, perhaps, the same steep tracks as those shepherds. We took in the view, then huddled into the cave, feeling at our backs the same rock, at our feet the same earth those shepherds once knew..

It was dark, though a torch soon gave light enough for me to find the words to read-
There were in the same country shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks by night....

And lo, an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

I bet they were!

No wonder the angel's first words were 'Fear not!' and their next, I bring you good news of great joy for all people....

And it struck me, of course, just how astonishing it was for shepherds to hear tonight's news first, the news of heaven come to earth, light piercing the darkness, God's Saviour born to rescue us all. Why this good news to them?

Perhaps because they were good at watching- with eyes and ears, on those dark nights in shepherds' fields.

But you didn't need to be alert to see the blinding light of the messenger and God's glory illuminating the hillside, didn't need to be attentive to hear the message and the angel choir singing praise. I think it was those shepherds because, well- this is how God is, this is how God comes to earth....

Earlier that day, travelling through the West Bank towards Bethlehem, crossing the Separation Wall which was then open, but today is heavily fortified, we stopped at the ruins of Herodion.

Herodion is a massive first century archaeological site on a hill near Bethlehem. As its name suggests it was built by Herod the Great, or rather

slave labour from the occupied territories nearby, built with gardens and fountains, precious water piped in to make an opulent oasis amidst the barren Judean countryside and its simple villages. Herod had the palace built on a hill so it was always visible to the locals, that symbol of empire and power.

In fact, he had his slaves increase the height of the hill to ensure it was higher than the Mount of Olives, and stood level with Mount Zion and Jerusalem, where he had another palace, of course.

As we stood atop the ancient ruins, we could see the story of Jesus: from birth to death -and resurrection.

It was stunningly real, there in Judea.

A story not of palaces and power, but of humility and hope.

That morning we watched a pair of kestrels swooping gracefully to and fro in cloudless skies- majestic and free as they fed young in the nest they'd built high and safe in the ruined walls. I hardly dare think what airborne horrors take to those same skies now.

But in Jesus' day there was also violence, oppression, poverty. He too fled to Egypt to escape genocide. Jesus came into a dark, dark world - because this is how God is, this is how God comes to earth.

From the walls of Herodion, we caught our first glimpse of the little town, nestling amongst hills about 5 miles from Jerusalem.

The ancient, royal walled city of Bethlehem was, until recently, a bustling commercial centre, catering also for pilgrims and tourists who come to see for themselves. To see the place where 'the hopes and fears of all the years' were met on this night, the spot where the everlasting light first shone forth..

We too went to Bethlehem and to that spot, within the oldest complete church in the world, the orthodox Church of the Nativity.

Its holiest shrine is not about death but birth, and not on a high altar but in the grotto, possibly built over the cave where Mary gave birth to Jesus. The grotto is accessed through the low wooden Door of Humility, its height reduced, they say, to stop Crusaders riding in!

We stooped down into the grotto, down to what feels like the centre of the earth, for he came down to earth from heaven...

At its very heart, within a sort of fireplace a silver star is set in the marble floor. One by one, we bowed low to see, to touch, to know the place, to worship the babe of Bethlehem.

In a humble cattle shed or cave, within sight of the grandeur of Herodion, was born the King of the Universe, the Saviour of the World. It was stunningly real, there in Bethlehem.

A story not of palaces and power, but of humility and hope.

And tonight in Bethlehem, with none of the usual crowds, the nativity scene in Manger Square has been replaced by a cave built of rubble, rubble from the war, the baby Jesus just visible underneath the mound. And in place of the Christmas Tree, there is an olive tree.

Jesus came down into a dark, dark world - this is how God is, this is how God still comes to earth.

I wonder what your journey, your pilgrimage has been to get here tonight? Has habit brought you, or family or tradition, are you taking a risk by coming, do you come in faith, or fear, or hope?

Why ever you came, know you are welcome, draw close and see, as I did in Bethlehem.

Know that this is how God is, this is how God comes to earth, not in pomp and power, but lowliness and love. Love for each one, of all races and creeds, ages and stages. Love for the outsiders and the confused, for the overworked and the overlooked.

This is how God is, this is how God comes to earth.

The poet John Betjeman wrote with wry humour about Christmas cheer in suburban England and asked hauntingly, 'But is it true?' The answer was in his final lines - the incomparable Truth
That God was man in Palestine, and lives today in bread and wine.

In this Communion service we hear again that truth, that Jesus lived on earth, in the same war-torn land shown on our screens everyday. We hear the truth that he gave his life for us and rose again to bring new life beyond the grave, to bring peace and hope where there is war and despair: because This is how God is, this is how God still comes to earth. And he lives today by his Spirit in our hearts and in the bread and wine we share.

Please come closer and receive Communion, or a prayer- you are welcome. You don't need to be a regular or an Anglican. Come see, taste and know for yourself, that God loves you, knows you, welcomes you, because of Jesus, our Saviour, the true light shining in the darkness.

This is how God is, this is how God comes to earth, tonight.