

***And is it true?* – Isaiah 52: 7-10 & John 1: 1-14**  
**Sermon for Midnight Communion 24/12/21 (Rev Phil Wootton)**

'Is Bethlehem a real place?' asked the child. I was showing Year 2 my purple stole, and I'd mentioned it was special because I'd bought it in Bethlehem. Hence the question, asked with real surprise. I shouldn't have been surprised to be asked. The way we treat the Christmas story it can so easily sound like a fairy tale. The Nativity falls in panto season. It's all part of the seasonal mix, all sprinkled with stardust.

I was happy to reassure – Yes, Bethlehem is real. I've been there several times. It's a big, bustling town nowadays, with shops, and houses, and streets, and traffic jams – and places you can buy purple stoles! Bethlehem is inhabited by real people whose needs are very real – hence our Christmas collections are being made to 'Embrace the Middle East,' supporting people across the lands of the Bible, sharing the love of Jesus with those who live where he lived.

The child's question reminded me of John Betjeman's famous Christmas poem, in which he asks:

*And is it true? And is it true,  
This most tremendous tale of all,  
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,  
A Baby in an ox's stall?  
The Maker of the stars and sea  
Become a Child on earth for me?*

Is it true? Can we take the Christmas story for real? We have two witness, St Luke and St Matthew, who actually tell quite different tales. Luke tells the story of a young girl called Mary, who, engaged to be married, is confronted by an angel saying she was going to bear God's Son; that, duly married, she and husband Joseph by dint of the forces of bureaucracy, end up Bethlehem where the child is born. Bethlehem is the historic town of David, shepherd king of old; and lo and behold shepherds appear to greet the new-born – surely a king in the making. Eight days later they take the child to near-by Jerusalem for dedication at the Temple: all the rituals are observed. Luke tells the story from Mary's point of view, and emphasises how everything is embedded in the ancient holy places, practices and customs of the Jewish people.

Our second witness is St Matthew, who tells the story of a man called Joseph, who, no sooner than he's introduced, is told in a dream his bride-to-be is already pregnant, but not worry because the conception is by the Holy Spirit. The child is born in Bethlehem, and some time later is greeted by mysterious foreign astronomers who have travelled half way round the world to acclaim him king. But soon, the family is forced to fly to escape the current king who would brook no rivals. Matthew tells the story from Joseph's point of view. He too emphasises that it is a Jewish story, prophesied long ago in Jewish scriptures, but the story is of how their God was opening up his salvation to the whole world.

Now, we know the two accounts mould together very well to make what we call 'the Nativity.' Their differences worry some people, but the basic facts are true to both; there are no outright contradictions. Their writers choose different elements because they have subtly different priorities. Both use the birth narratives to set the scene for the life of Jesus as they want to tell it.

To some, the stories sound a bit fantastical. All the activity is directed, it seems, either by angels or by dreams (or by angels appearing in dreams). I would rather say they are stories of wonder and mystery. The message they are trying to convey is far stranger, and more profound, and more wonderful, than can be said in a straightforward way. That, I think, is why St John's Gospel goes for poetry rather than prose. John's Prologue does not introduce Jesus as a baby, nor indeed as a grown-up teacher, healer, leader, influencer, or rabbi – all of which he was famous for. Instead, he introduces him as One from the beginning, as God incarnate, as Word made flesh, as truth embodied, as light for the world. When we say, 'Is it true?' these are the real truths we are asking about.

The question most people have in mind, when we ask, 'Is it true?' is whether Mary really was a virgin when Jesus was conceived. By its very nature, that's a question that can only be answered by faith. For me, as for the church through the ages, this is something we accept through faith. For others, the virgin birth makes the whole thing seem implausible – scientifically impossible, they'd say. The important thing is the truth behind what we say in the Creed, behind the poetry and the story: that the Son of God came into the world as a human child; that God identified completely with the human race; that God stooped to become one with us so that he might raise us to become one with him.

*And is it true? For if it is ...  
[Nothing] can with this truth compare  
– that God was man in Palestine  
And lives today in Bread and Wine*

In the end, we cannot use the methods either of scientists or of historians to prove this sort of truth. It's a question of the authenticity of the message – whether the words ring true. For very many of us, what rings true is that he lives today – a presence to be encountered, an inner power to be received, a guide to be followed, life to be received.

Let me conclude by returning to Bethlehem. In the Holy Land, Christians talk about the 'Fifth Gospel' – the sites of the holy places and the ancient Christian communities living there – that they bear witness to the life of Christ. These are the stones of the buildings – like the Church of the Nativity said to stand on the exact spot where Christ was born – and the living stones of the believers living there. Even in Bethlehem, the community of faith grew up not from the moment of Jesus' birth, but from the Easter events, his death and resurrection. That's the all-important moment. For us today, I think, if we take the Christmas story on its own, it's likely to stay just like a fairy tale. But if we read it back from Easter, if we approach it with faith in the One who died and rose again, the account of Jesus' birth becomes as solid as the stones of the Church of the Nativity. Bethlehem is for real, and Christ is for real, then, now, and always.