

DAY FIFTEEN – LOVE

Good morning everyone,

In a first year, 'Introduction to Christian Theology' lecture, the lecturer asked us to fill in the blank: "God is _____". That is the task of theology, answering that question. How would you fill in the blank? My immediate response was, and still is, LOVE. God is love. In many ways, it is that simple. Yet the ramifications are far from easy or straight-forward.

One of my favourite carols is "Love came down at Christmas", partly because I like the melody to which we sing it but mostly because of the sentiment behind it. The idea that divine love—complete, unflinching, unconditional—took human flesh is, for me, the utter marvel of the Christmas story. God's love lived our lives and struggles. God's love survived infant vulnerability and enjoyed eating and laughing, as well as facing down resentment and vitriol. God's love was not repelled by poverty or illness or disease or mistakes. God's love held those things that many of us run far from: held, saw, heard, understood, and blessed. That would not have been possible from afar. God's love became incarnate so we could more fully grasp the fullness of God's love. A love that is so immense, so indescribable, all we can do is acknowledge it and return to the source: God. It can become circular, but it remains the truth of Christmas.

Theology can only take us so far. Sometimes we must reach for art or poetry or song to express the inexpressible. So, in humility, I offer these words from another of my favourite hymns:

"Love is the light in the tunnel of pain,
"love is the will to be whole once again,
"love is the cure for the frightened and flawed,
"God is where love is for love is of God."

May you know the touch of God's love in your heart, soul, body and relationships. Fee.



DAY SIXTEEN – SHEPHERD(S)

Greetings to you all,

I find the SHEPHERDs in Luke's telling of the nativity really quite fascinating. They take up more verses than Joseph and we even have them speaking, something Luke's Joseph does not seem to do at all. These are significant characters in our story, a point not often appreciated by those chosen to wear tea-towels on their heads each December.

Shepherding is amongst the oldest of human occupations, quite separate from the role of farmer, and involves taking sheep across swathes of land to find pasture. Historically, shepherds rarely owned the sheep but were paid to look after another person's property, ensuring the animals ate well, stayed together, were protected from predators, and made it to market on time. Whilst the men who did this work tended to live apart from society, without wives or children due to their nomadic lifestyle, they were not solitary workers. They would often work in teams, either to look after a large flock or to pool their efforts across different flocks. They lived and slept with their sheep, leading and protecting them, and going wherever the sheep would best be fed.

Most of us understand the place of the shepherds in the nativity story as demonstrating that Jesus was born for everyone, and that God cared as much (if not more so) about those on the edges of society as those with power, wealth and privilege. It is an interpretation that sits well with Luke's inclusive and justice-seeking theology, spelt out for us in Mary's Magnificat just a few verses before. I do not dispute this approach, but I wonder if there is even more to ponder? The imagery of shepherds is used numerous times in the Hebrew scriptures as a metaphor for God, perhaps most famously in the 23rd Psalm: "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want". There is also a link with King David, whose shepherding skills were put to spectacular use in slaying the Philistine, Goliath. Shepherds might have been outside society in some ways, but they were also representative of both the divine protection of God and the kingly line of David. All of these layers of meaning are important for grasping how significant is this moment in history, for Luke and for all of us.

Whether you consider yourself an outcast, at the top of the social ladder, or somewhere in between, TO YOU is born a Saviour, the Messiah. May that bring you excitement, hope and wonder this season, and always. Fee.



DAY SEVENTEEN – SHEEP

Good morning to you,

Technically speaking, the word SHEEP does not appear in our nativity story. Luke tells us about shepherds “keeping watch over their flock” and we make a reasonable assumption that the flock consists of sheep. Then again, no other non-human animal is mentioned even tangentially, be it donkey or cattle, so I thought we would wonder about sheep today.

Few of us would like to be compared to a sheep. There is a cultural assumption that sheep are unintelligent animals—somewhat refuted by scientific enquiry—and easily led. Indeed, in recent years the term “sheeple” has been coined to represent people acting only on the basis of what is trending or popular. No one wants to be seen as a sheeple; it is not a term of endearment. Yet, this disparaging use of sheep in our language glosses over our long history with a useful, and not completely stupid, animal.

It is thought that sheep were amongst the first animals domesticated when we moved from being hunter-gatherers to agriculturalists. We kept them for fleeces, meat, hide and, after a while, wool-for-spinning and milk as well. Today, there are hundreds, certainly over a thousand, sheep breeds in the world, many bred to support a specific agricultural need: wool, meat, milk, etc. Moreover, sheep have proven to be useful in other ways, such as being environmentally friendly herbicides and insecticides in certain crop fields, reducing the requirement to use chemicals. And whilst they do tend to follow their flock, this is a sign of them being social, rather than stupid, animals. Indeed, sheep exhibit signs of stress when they are isolated from their flock (sound familiar?!) All this is (I think) fascinating for our reading of the nativity story even before we consider of the rich history of sheep/lambs in the Hebrew Scriptures, or in later Christian theology which names Jesus, amongst other things, as the “Lamb of God”, the *Agnus Dei*.

Instead of resisting the label of ‘sheep’, perhaps we can wonder what we might learn from it? An animal that has strength in diversity. A social animal that sticks together when under threat. An animal that could help farm and produce foodstuffs more sustainably. An animal who helps people to rest, both in warmth and quietness of mind. Perhaps being a sheep is not so bad after all.

May you know your inner sheep this day. Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY EIGHTEEN – ANGELS

Friday salutations everyone,

ANGELS are a recurring theme in our nativity story, both for Luke and Matthew. I have already waxed lyrical about Gabriel specifically, so today I am going to focus on angels in a more general sense and, particularly, as they appear to the shepherds (and sheep!) in Luke.

The word 'angel' literally means 'messenger' and this is what many of the angels depicted throughout the Christian Scriptures seem to do: bring messages from God to human beings. This is what the first angel to appear to the shepherds is doing: he is letting them know "good news of great joy", namely that the Messiah has been born. But angels seem to do more than just vocalise God's messages. They interact with human beings in a physical sense as well: wrestling with Jacob, feeding Elijah, touching Isaiah's lips with hot coals. Angels also attend to God, sing praises to God and help God defeat God's enemies. And this is where I learnt something completely new (apologies if what I am about to share is obvious to you!). The "Lord of hosts" seems to mean that God is the 'Lord of the heavenly host' (which I had grasped) but that 'the heavenly host' were the armies of angels. Armies; as in violence. That, I had not quite appreciated before. It now feels a bit weird to me that the birth of the Prince of Peace was sung about by a sky-full of angel warriors! Anyway, be they fighting angels or defensive angels or something else entirely, a whole multitude of angels sang praises to God. The sky was filled, and "glory of the Lord shone" all around. What a spectacular sight! That could not have been achieved by just one or two angels...it needed lots. Coming together, singing together, praising together, lighting up the sky together. These angels, in my mind, become greater than the sum of their parts. Whilst we might not want to emulate their militaristic tendencies, in pursuit of a non-violent path of Christian witness, this truth of pointing to something greater than ourselves...being something greater than ourselves...remains a powerful lesson. Particularly today.

You are never a lone voice. And you are never alone. Join in with angels and human beings alike, proclaiming good news of great joy and singing praises to God. Blessings, Fee.



DAY NINETEEN – CHORUS

Good morning everyone,

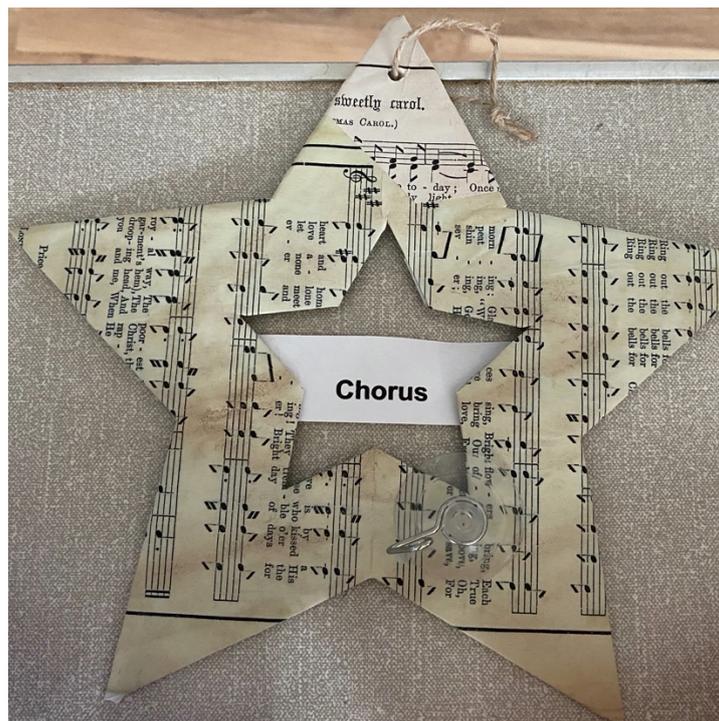
Following on from yesterday's singing angels, I am thinking about CHORUS today...in the sense of a group of people singing rather than the refrain of a song. It is a bitter-sweet reflection as communal singing has largely left our lives in 2020, with singing becoming more of a solo affair, or something done only with families or via screens. I give thanks for all those who have helped us to keep singing in some way, shape or form this year; their efforts have been a balm for our souls and brought joy to our hearts.

Music in general, not just singing, helps with brain function and memory-recall. Almost all of us have experienced a 'flash-back' sensation when we hear a particular piece of music: for example, Blondie's "Maria" transports me straight back to sixth year in school. We now know, through a wealth of research, that singing (particularly group singing) does even more for us than just bring back memories. It is outright good for us. Physically, singing lowers our blood pressure, boosts the immune system, and can be a bit of a work-out (particularly, but not exclusively, if you start adding in movement, such as dance or Makaton). Emotionally, we are rewarded by the release of feel-good hormones and, especially for children and young ones, there are educational benefits in terms of working together, counting, listening, etc. Perhaps most important of all, though—and the bit we have most missed this year—is the social and spiritual impacts of singing with others.

Bonds are built through singing and we become part of something larger. For those of us who sing in church, the connection with those around us—and with all those who have sung those words before—might not be visible but it is astonishingly powerful. Then, when we join in with angels and direct our singing to God, a whole other dimension is opened up as well.

Even when we do not join in, the impact of human voices singing individually or in unison/harmony is physical, emotional and spiritual: Welsh male voice choirs are renowned for raising the hairs on the back of countless necks! Earlier this year, I was deeply moved listening to a Rabbi lead Rosh Hashanah worship online. I did not know the liturgy and could only pick out a few very basic words and phrases in Hebrew, but in listening to her voice I felt a sense of worship...a sense of connection with God. I cannot explain it; I only know it happened. Our human connection to God through singing is not to be underestimated; a truth the angels knew well.

So, if you have not sung for a while, I urge you to do so today. Either sing as you go about your daily life or join in with something on the radio, television or online (there are plenty of MPC services to choose from!). But sing. Lament the inability to sing with others but give thanks that we can still connect through the music and words themselves. Thanks be to God! Fee.



SUNDAY 20 DECEMEBER – ADDITIONAL REFLECTION

Hello there everyone,

I want to offer a wee acknowledgement that emotions will be raw today. Even for those of us who had planned for (even relished, perhaps?) a quiet Christmas, the news that we are to enter Level Four from Boxing Day is an unexpected blow. If you had planned to see loved ones this week--some of whom you might not have seen at all this year--the disappointment will be deep and devastating.

I have learnt this morning, via the indomitable Dr Suzanne Zeedyk, that disappointment is a hugely powerful emotion at the best of times. Expecting someone to wave and say hello as they pass you, and it does not happen for some reason? Disappointment. The greater the stakes, the deeper the disappointment. Our expectations have been raised and the stakes were high this Christmas period...no wonder we are hurting. If you have a look at her Facebook page or Twitter account there are links to interesting, helpful articles to tell you more. But, for now, I offer this:

- Today is a tough day: it is OK to feel it.
- Name your disappointment as such.
- Acknowledge exactly what expectations you have lost.
- Breathe.
- Share your feelings with others.
- Do something that can help you feel better...particularly if it might help you laugh.
- Remember to breathe.
- Start to wonder if at least some of your expectations might be met in another way (it is OK if you cannot do this for a few days).
- We will get through this.
- Breathe.

Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY TWENTY – SILENCE

Sunday salutations, my friends,

How many of you are comfortable with SILENCE? Is it bearable when you are by yourself or must you have a radio/TV/music/book on in the background? What about when you are with someone else or in a group, can you maintain silence or are you driven to fill it? When I was at uni, there were a few of us who felt awkward if there were more than a few seconds silence after the tutor asked something of the class...I do not know whether everyone else loved us for filling the void or hated us for dominating the air space!

Silence is golden in some situations. If we need a break or a rest, silence can be soothing. But, for a lot of the time, for lots of us, we can find prolonged silence uncomfortable (and, believe me, if you have a Dachshund and she goes silent, that is most worrying indeed!). Why is that? Is it because we do not want to hear what might be going on in our heads and hearts? Will silence force to the surface things we have kept buried for too long? What would be the consequences of letting those things surface?

What about silence when we are with others? Often, when people know each other well, comfortable silences can be a natural part of the relationship: nothing needs to be said when time is spent with loved ones. But, at other times, we feel compelled to say something when silence may be more appropriate. Sometimes there are no words to counter a difficult (or, indeed, joyful) disclosure. We often want to offer words of sympathy, solitude or hope, but there are often no words. Those are tough silences, but our body language is probably more powerful than anything we might try to say. Likewise, we may want to fill a gap in a story someone is stutteringly telling us when actually what they need is time, space and silence to process thoughts and formulate their words. Profound listening needs open silence, and open silence needs deep courage to hold it. Silence is a rare thing in our ever-connected world, but it can be the gateway to profound understanding, for ourselves and others. May we treasure silence when we need it and offer it when it is appropriate. Peace be with you, Fee.



DAY TWENTY-ONE – HOPE

Hello everyone,

The power of HOPE in our lives is massive. It is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of hope in our daily living and our life-planning. When we lose hope, we can really struggle to find the will to do anything, even live. It really is that fundamental.

There are, I think, different layers of hope, some of which is related to the (unscheduled) reflection I offered yesterday on disappointment. Hope and disappointment can be linked, especially when our hope is specific. If we hope to achieve a specific thing or get the test results we want, a different outcome produces disappointment. The bigger and more influential the hope, the greater the resultant disappointment if that hope is dashed. From that point of view, advice such as “don’t get your hopes up” or “don’t count your chickens” is wise. If we reduce our expectations, we reduce the likelihood and/or impact of disappointment. But hope is also motivating. If we hope to pass our driving test, we are more likely to put in lots of practice. If we hope for better lives for children, we do what we can to build relationships with them. Coupled to a dream or a vision of something better, hope can be the fuel that gets us there.

Putting these two ideas together helps us understand hope in difficult circumstances. If we make our hopes too specific in tough times (e.g. ‘everything will be fine in a fortnight’) we are leaving ourselves open to repeated disappointment. And that is hard to weather on an ongoing basis. On the other hand, we need some hope that things will get easier at some point so that we keep going from day to day. Where do we find such hope? Hope that is both real and yet loosely defined? For many people, it is in creation around us. The turning of the earth, the rising of the sun, the rhythm of the seasons, the kind acts of others. Being in awe of something bigger—be it the wonders of a godless cosmos or the infinite love of a Creator God—helps us lift our eyes and have hope for tomorrow, even a better tomorrow. And, when things hit rock bottom and we cannot find an ounce of hope in our souls, that is when the community around us steps in. In the church, one of the greatest gifts we give one another is holding onto hope for those who cannot find it.

Witnessing to the hope of creation, incarnation and resurrection when our sisters and brothers in Christ have lost all hope. Deep hope is a communal activity and, in that sense, can never truly be lost.

Whether you are full of hope or had your hopes dashed, know that you are not alone. When you can, hold hope for others. When you cannot, know others are holding hope for you. Thanks be to God! Fee.

