

Does He Know? Does He Care?

Sermon at St Swithuns Sandy January 10th 2021

When I was listening to the news this week and talking to a number of people around the town, the big question that arose in my mind for me was, 'Does God know about these things and does He care?' This is not just a philosophical question for us; it's a very personal question at difficult times and when we don't quite understand what's happening around the world. Does God know and does God care? Where do we go to look for an answer?

For me, it always means going back to look at Jesus and see what God has said about Jesus. We find it in John's Gospel, don't we, right at the very beginning we hear John writing; *In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, the Logos. Jesus was with God and was God and all things were made. In him was life, that life was the light of mankind. And the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never overcome it. The true Light, that gives light to everybody, was coming into the world and he was in the world and the world was made through him and the world didn't recognise him but he came to his own and to those that received him he gave the power to become children of God. The Word became flesh, dwelt amongst us and lived amongst us, we've seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father full of grace and truth.* (John 1: 1-14) That's Jesus, that's what God says about himself, he came to live in our world, to understand it and to help us to know that he understands and that he cares.

The events around Jesus's birthday, they run so much deeper than just one weekend and the church calendar reflects that. Traditionally, the church celebrates with the season of four weeks of Advent leading right up to Christmas, and then six weeks afterwards leading to Candlemas. I didn't really understand Candlemas until more recently, understanding now the position of the church to go through the next six weeks thinking about the life of Jesus and up to the thirty days when Jesus was presented in the temple.

Jesus was circumcised in the village of Bethlehem, probably in their little synagogue at the age of eight days. On the eighth day he was named Jesus and circumcised just as the angels said (Luke 2:21) but it was thirty days after that that he entered in the Temple in Jerusalem. That takes us up to February 2nd. In some parts of the church, we take our Christmas trees down on the 12th day of Christmas but in many parts of the world they leave them up right up until February and take them down at Candlemas.

We know that Mary and Joseph were very poor because they sacrificed two pigeons for the purification of Mary and the dedication of Jesus. And it was there, thirty days afterwards, that Joseph and Mary with Jesus were greeted by Simeon and Anna, those two lovely old people that had been waiting to see the Messiah. Luke Chapter 2 tells us how these events took place, Luke records it as: Jesus was born; the angels came, they were revealed to the shepherds and the shepherds came to Bethlehem; after the shepherds came Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day; and then according to traditions, he went with his mum to the purification and the dedication at Jerusalem.

We know that little story from Simeon, you recall it as the Nunc Dimittis, (Lord, now let thy servant depart in peace according to thy word), that old man who had been waiting all his life for this promise that the Holy Spirit had given him. And at that moment I can almost imagine Simeon sitting at home, eating his breakfast, and saying, 'Do you know, it's a bit dull and I'm a bit tired, a bit achy, I think I'll go later' and the Holy Spirit saying to him, 'No, no, no, now it the time that you need to go!' He's just halfway through his porridge and the Holy Spirit says, 'No, go now!' and he doesn't know why he's going, but he goes, and there it is, as he walks into the temple he sees Mary and Joseph and Jesus walking out! He could have missed them, don't you think? He could have done. Well, he was there at the right time and he holds the baby in his hands and he says, 'Now Lord, let your servant depart in peace, because I have seen the salvation that you have brought.'

Then Anna comes along and picks up the baby and blesses the baby Jesus and his mother Mary. And I just think of how the Holy Spirit tells you and tells me sometimes to go and do it now. This is the time, right now is the time for the phone call. You feel it in your spirit, you hear the Lord say 'write that letter now, don't put it off for another week' and you make the phone call and somebody answers it and says, 'do you know this is just what I need right now, it's funny that you should call right now.' Have you heard them say it, 'it's funny that you should call right now because this is on my mind?' I've heard it numerous times, out of the blue people have called or spoken or I've called them, and it's the same for you, the Spirit of God tells you to do it now as he did with Simeon, or else he may have missed it and never known.

There are things in the Bible that are written and there are some things that are not and the way of understanding the four Gospels is that not everything is in the one Gospel, that's why we read all four of them, but I hadn't quite realised that Luke records almost all of the Christmas story. All that Matthew records is that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and the Magi, the Kings. It's Luke that gives us almost everything else. Luke does 120 verses in two chapters. He tells us all about Zachariah and Elizabeth, all about John the Baptist being born, the angels coming to the shepherds, the circumcision, the going to the Temple and then, from that, he then says, 'And Mary and Joseph went back to Nazareth.' (Luke 2:39) He misses out the bit of the Magi, whereas Matthew tells us that the Magi came when Jesus was a toddler. They came to the house where Jesus was living, and then he escaped into Egypt and months or years later he came back to Judea and Bethlehem and then went back to Nazareth. It's not a contradiction, it's just the different way that the different writers of the Gospel are including it.

If you recall in John Chapter 21, he writes, 'I couldn't record everything – if I could the whole world wouldn't have enough room.' Let me read it to you, John Chapter 21, verse 24: *I had to leave things out because I didn't have room. This disciple is the one who testifies of these events and recorded them here and we know that his account is accurate. Jesus also did many other things and if they were all written down I suppose the whole world couldn't contain the number of scrolls that would need to be written.*

They wrote things on scrolls, a rolled up parchment and of course the longer it got the more difficult it was to carry around! You could end up with this huge, long toilet roll of parchment if he was to

include everything, so John says 'I just had to choose what I would do and what I would record.' John doesn't record anything of the birth and neither does Mark. He just leaves it all out, starts us when Jesus is 30 years old.

It's only when somebody invented the book, where you could put in pages, turning the parchment into separate leaves; Christians took it up because then they could put all the Gospels together and all the Letters together and the Bible became the Book and became very popular. It became the thing that we use because of the Christians in the years 200 to 300 AD. Much easier to hide if you're in a time of persecution, you can carry that much easier than the scrolls.

So we find that Matthew writes about the Magi and he calls Jesus the King and his Gospel is all about the King and the Kingdom. That's why he includes it and Luke doesn't bother. Luke hasn't got space for that story but Matthew includes it as pretty much the only story of Jesus' birth as he emphasises in the whole of his Gospel that Jesus is King of kings and Lord of lords. In Matthew's Gospel you see that he writes all the Kingdom parables of Jesus; when the King comes, when the Kingdom comes, and on the cross Jesus is called the King of the Jews. At his birth he is the King of the Jews, at his death he is the King of the Jews. It's as though Matthew has put these two great parentheses to say all of this is about Jesus coming and being the King. Being the King is so important because it means that he is the one who has the power to help us in time of need.

Because coming back to the beginning, what has all this got to do with 'does God know and does God care?' I think the more I know and read about the Gospel stories the more I examine Jesus afresh, the more I use my imagination and put myself in that position.

When you look for the detail, when you read again the Gospels and you think what was it like for Mary as her belly was swelling and as the gossips were starting to wag their tongues? What did that feel like? What did it look like for the young family as they were growing up in Egypt? What was it like, what is it like to be refugees today? What was it like for Jesus to be at home with Mary? What was it like to weep at the cross? What was it like for Jesus to see his friends abandon him at the cross? What was it like?

Jesus's life, his ministry, was only 36 months, really, really short. And all the emotions that you and I feel are encompassed in that short 36 months. And when you use your imagination you notice the compassion in his eyes when he speaks to people. Jairus, when he lost his daughter, when his daughter was dying. When he stops for the widow of Nain who has just lost her son. When you see the softness of his words to the broken-hearted. But the strength and the steel in him when he confronts the powerful and the proud and the manipulative. This Jesus; you have to use your imagination. Imagine what it was like for Nicodemus. And when you get there it brings the whole thing alive afresh and you realise that he knows. He knows! He's been here and he knows.

That last week of his life that takes up most of the Gospels, fifty per cent, half of Mark's Gospel in just the last week. Do you imagine the emotions, the feelings and the extent of the anguish and the pain? When you see his tears at Lazarus's tomb, his agony of heart in the garden of Gethsemane, on the cross when he looks at the soldiers and the thief and his mother and John. When he realises that all his friends have forsaken him and now he cries out and says, 'Father, why have you forsaken me?' As you get into those emotions and use

your imagination the thing comes alive and with that life you realise that he cares, that God cares so deeply. He came to be with us.

Some verses that are worth committing to memory, knowing them as something alive in your mind. 2 Corinthians Chapter 1 you're very familiar with, right? 2 Corinthians Chapter 1, verses 3 and 4. Praise be to the God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those who are in trouble with the comfort that we ourselves have received from God. Just as we share in the sufferings of Christ, so through Christ we share in his comfort. Beautiful, lovely thing, the God of all comfort. He knows and he loves.

Peter, in a time of persecution, writes *Cast all your cares and anxieties on him, for he cares for you, he does.* (1 Peter 5:7) And Hebrews, Chapter 2 and Chapter 4 and Philippians Chapter 2. Jesus came, God came to be with us so that you might know that he knows and he cares.

I want to finish with a little poem which perhaps you've heard before, perhaps it's new to you. It's a poem, it's a parable but it kind of asks that question does God know and does he care. It's called 'The Long Silence'.

The Long Silence

At the end of time, billions of people were seated on a great plain before God's throne. Most shrank back from the brilliant light before them. But some groups near the front talked heatedly, with belligerence. "Can God judge us? How can He know about suffering?" snapped an old man as he ripped open a sleeve to reveal a tattooed number from a Nazi concentration camp. "We endured terror ... beatings ... torture ... death!" In another group an Afro-American youth lowered his collar. "What about this?" he demanded, showing an ugly rope burn. "Lynched, for no crime but being black!" In another crowd there was a pregnant schoolgirl with sullen eyes: "Why should I suffer?" she murmured. "It wasn't my fault."

Far out across the plain were 100's of such groups. Each had a complaint against God for the evil and suffering He had permitted in His world. How lucky God was to live in Heaven, where all was sweetness and light. Where there was no weeping or fear, no hunger or hatred. What did God know of all that man had been forced to endure in this world? For God leads a pretty sheltered life, they said. So each of these groups sent forth their leader, chosen because he had suffered the most. A Jew, a black South-African, a person from Hiroshima, a horribly deformed arthritic, a thalidomide child.

In the centre of the vast plain, they consulted with each other. At last they were ready to present their case. It was rather clever. Before God could be qualified to be their judge, He must endure what they had endured.

Their decision was that God should be sentenced to live on earth as a man. Let him be born a Jew. Let the legitimacy of his birth be doubted.

Give him a work so difficult that even his family will think him out of his mind. Let him be betrayed by his closest friends. Let him face false charges, be tried by a prejudiced jury and convicted by a cowardly judge.

Let him be tortured. At the last, let him see what it means to feel totally abandoned and terribly alone.

Then let him die a horrible death and let there be no doubt that he died, naked and mocked with a baying crowd to witness it. As each leader announced his portion of the sentence, loud murmurs of approval went up from the throng of people assembled.

When the last had finished pronouncing sentence, there was a long silence.

No one uttered a word.

No one moved. As one by one they began to recognise that it was Jesus before them on the throne of Grace

And suddenly all knew that God had already served His sentence.

Does God know? Does God care? I would encourage you to put your faith and trust in a saviour who does know and to come to the throne of Grace in time of need. May God bless us in these days. Amen

Revd Huw Davies January 10th 2021