

Midnight Mass – 24th December 2020

‘He was in the world and the world came into being through him, and the world did not know him.’ John 1. 10

He is only a newborn baby – how could they know him? How could they know that in Jesus, uniquely, God reveals himself? How could they know that in him, eternity intersects with time?

Mary knew. She had experienced something she described as the angel Gabriel and recognised the truth in the angel’s revelation. According to legend the ox and the ass knew. Isaiah had prophesied that “The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master’s crib” and by the second century that was understood to refer to the birth in Bethlehem. Some shepherds experienced something astounding and a band of wandering magi had an inkling of something new and tremendous linked to an astronomical event. Who else?

There are beautiful stories suggesting that the natural world knew – that at midnight on Christmas Eve time stood still. The motion of the planets ceased, the noise of the earth stopped, there was silence and then the song of the angels.

There are lovely tales too, of the hay of the manger bursting into flower – and if you look under the Christmas tree in the south chapel, the Christmas roses and the *Anemone blanda* are a reminder of that. Thirty years later entering Jerusalem to the acclaim of the crowd, Jesus commented laconically, “If the people didn’t shout ‘Hosanna,’ the stones themselves would cry out.”

But after the glorious night of the birth in Bethlehem, how could the world know? ‘He was in the world and the world came into being through him and the world did not know him.’ Perhaps it is better that the world didn’t know. For thirty years he led a hidden life, but even so, violence was never far away. First there was the massacre of the babies of Bethlehem and then finally after his cousin John the Baptist had been executed, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the intersection of time and eternity in the kingdom of heaven. Then the world knew, “And we perceived his glory, full of grace and truth.”

Actually, what most of the government and religious officials perceived was not grace and truth but a troublemaker and threat to the religion and the state. And among those who did perceive his grace and truth, some, like Peter reacted with awe and love, but many others reacted with fear, hatred and rejection. How we respond to this tiny baby who is God himself, determines our life, our death and our eternity.

On the afternoon of Christmas Eve the children came into church to light candles and pray and hear Emma Elliott sing the candle song and to see the child, lying in the hay. It is perhaps easier for the children to see and worship. As we grow older we are not all able to love the babe of Bethlehem. For some of us it may seem sentimental and for others the whole story is just too... unlikely. But even if we can’t all respond to the birth of God as a newborn baby with genuine joy, we are all called to open eyed contemplation of who this baby is. Because there was a baby. A baby who grew to be Jeshua-bar-Joseph and who was crucified. Josephus, a Jewish contemporary who had no love for Christians, confirms Jesus’ life and death. And if the testimony of the evangelists is true, the baby who grew to be Jesus is also the resurrected Christ. The evangelists were prepared to die for the truth of the Gospel - the good news of the birth, the life and the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

But for now, the one who will be the resurrected Lord lies helpless, wrapped up in tight bands in a manger in a strange town. A tiny baby who lies at the intersection of time and eternity is our grace and truth, our light in the darkness, our wisdom, our morning star, our key to eternal life, our 'God with us.'