

Hinde Street Methodist Church
Saturday 25 December 2021
11.00am Rev Peter Cornick

Becoming human
A sermon preached on Christmas Day

Objects in a barn

The Repair Shop, is a TV programme, set in a barn in West Sussex. In the barn, specialist tradespeople – carpenters, metal workers, upholsterers, painting restorers and needle workers – repair all manner of objects which the public bring to them. Old train sets, worn out dolls, broken clocks and torn pictures, are sympathetically restored, to reflect their former glory. The format of the programme is, that the people who brought in the broken objects, return, and are amazed at the restoration – usually moved to tears.

The objects themselves are, whilst often beautiful or of historic interest, just objects. What is significant is the story which goes with them. The objects often remind the person of their mother, or grandfather, a child or a Christmas present they received when young. Repaired and restored, the object connects them to someone from their past.

Pieces of tin or material, repaired in a barn, speak of love, loss, and relationship. People bring objects for repair but leave understanding what it means to become more human.

To become more human

Mark Oakley writes about the shepherds going to the stable – a barn.

In a place of austerity, an outhouse in an insignificant town, a spiritual distillation began, an unearthing of soul, a resuscitation. They didn't go to the stable to become more religious, they went to become more human.¹

In a lowly barn ... they went to become more human. That is quite an arresting phrase. Oakley notices how the shepherds were drawn there, by an encounter with angels in fields, whilst watching over their sheep. And what it means to be human is found in a helpless baby. In an out post of empire, where the population are being coerced by a census, and where God's messengers, appear as an angelic host, the Saviour, Messiah, Lord, is not born in the best hotel suite, but in a barn, wrapped in bands of cloth, and laid in a cattle trough; appears not as a powerful prince, but as a child.

In a lowly barn, God is born among us, a saviour, precisely to repair our love, loss and relationship. In the divine human, Jesus, a child, the shepherds and we understand what it means to become more human.

Being there in person

In the last year – indeed two years – perhaps we have discovered what it means to become more human. Perhaps we have all purchased that special something for under the tree this year – buying something *non-essential* might have seemed like a real treat because we now know what it is like to only buy what is *essential* – perhaps you even realised the worth of your purchase to the person on

¹ Oakley, Mark, *By Way of the Heart*, London 2019 p16

the till – no longer on furlough. But we know from these last two years, that to become more human, means those visits to family or friends. Zoom can only do so much. How many people this Christmas have self-isolated – made a sacrifice to get that negative test – just so that today’s visit might happen. So that they could be there in person. Such a visit, is about *being there*; in the flesh – or to use another word – incarnate.

The nativity story is relatively simple. Shepherds, go to a barn to see Jesus having made the journey from fields. Rough workers are the very ones to tell Mary and Joseph, what the Lord has made known to them. The angelic episode occurs far from the place of birth. The shepherds bring the message to this barn – and everyone is amazed. Mary, perhaps remembering the previous visit of an angel to her – God’s messenger of the annunciation – treasures all these words – she ponders them in her heart. To ponder is to try and make sense of life. Mary, it would seem, is yet to put together, the pieces of this picture. What does it mean for her to become human? To bear God’s Son?

The shepherds turn up, in the flesh – in-carnate. It’s no accident. They reflect the baby himself – God, who turns up – in the flesh – in-carnate. The divine, born, to become more human.

And so, as we hear the nativity story again, perhaps there is, to use Mark Oakley’s words, ‘a spiritual distillation beginning’. An ‘unearthing of soul, a resuscitation’. Perhaps we hear this familiar story, as if for the first time; and ponder.

Pondering the Nativity

We think we as the church have a story to tell to others, a mission to be on, that others ought to listen to – yet it is the most unlikely of characters, according to the story, who bring tidings of good news to Mary – and perhaps to us too – do we ponder those people who turn up to us? Someone experiencing homelessness; someone who just wants to talk; someone living with addiction? What do we learn about God from those people? Do we ponder?

A child is born – a sign of God. Hope in the darkness. Great joy.

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

Do we ponder, who does God favour; where is peace to be found? Are the clues in this simple story? Ignored zero-hour workers, eking out a living? A family – travelling by Roman order – soon to be refugees – miles from home? A mother, pondering, with little of the ante natal support we might expect. When we ponder, amongst whom is God’s favour, God’s peace, to be found, we begin to find answers in the story. Whilst Augustus and Quirinius are mentioned – more as calendar references – the real characters of the story are far from the usual great and good. God, we ponder, is likely to save – to restore – to repair, a shepherd; a young mother – you or me.

And so, by pondering the nativity, we learn what it means to become more human. ‘A spiritual distillation [is] beginning’. An ‘unearthing of soul, a resuscitation’.

God has become like us; incarnate; in the flesh; come to save what needs repairing in our relationships with each other; with God.

This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

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