

Dear Friends,

Like many churches, it has been fantastic over the last few weeks to welcome children from the local schools into Wesley Place in Alsager. The final visit was just this last Friday, as a local primary school came for their annual Carol Concert. A whole school's worth of well behaved yet excited children - reading, singing, and dressing as nativity characters. The balcony was full with their parents proud of each child's contribution, and all concerned were thankful for the opportunity to see our church building.

The nativity story is often treated as a child's story, with animals to dress up as, a baby born, and a strange plot that almost begins with 'once upon a time' and finishes with 'they all lived happily ever after'. Well, the first is true of course, it is a story that is set in real human history, 1st century Palestine about 2000 years ago. It has the feel of a fairy story in that there are goodies and baddies, a simple plot that includes human joy and tragedy, a few mysterious characters and strange gifts, and, if not a happy ending, at least there is a convenient stopping point! It is a timeless story. But it doesn't have a 'happy ever after' ending. Even within the story an elderly man reminds the young mother at the heart of the story that her heart will be pierced with pain, and her baby son, when grown into a man, will cause much division and downfall amongst his peers.

But as was pointed out to me recently, most of the characters in the story are actually older people. Mature people whose lives have been marked by waiting and disappointment, their part in the story is about them seeing hope realised before they die. The 'getting on a bit' parents of John the Baptist will see their son live outside the bounds of decent society and he will come to a very sticky end by being beheaded at court. Mary and Joseph become refugees seeking asylum in a foreign land because their son is hunted down by a paranoid King Herod who sees the child as a threat, and Mary at least, will go on to see her son crucified, and mourn his death.

Is it any wonder we invent a donkey, an Inn keeper, and sometimes an Inn keeper's wife, in order to give the children sanitised parts to play and a little humour to enjoy.

We are all conscious of an ongoing world pandemic that's causing unprecedented anxiety, economic turmoil, and division around the world between those who have and those who do not. I write this the morning after news of a by-election result not very far away in north Shropshire, that seems to be another blow to a troubled and unstable prime minister, the papers are talking of people trying to 'save Christmas',

and many of us are trying to keep safe in order to actually see family at Christmas this year.

The advent journey travels through darkness towards light - the end of our nativity story is reflected on by the later gospel writer John - the word became flesh and dwelt amongst us; the light shines in the darkness and cannot be put out, and we have seen his glory, for he is full of grace and truth.

I think my prayer and word this year has been hope. It's a hope for the school children as they grow, that they will discover resilience in a troubled world. I don't want them protected from the darkness, but to discover trust and hope as they journey through it because they also believe in the light. I want the older people who have waited all their lives to be able to die in peace because they have passed on their wisdom before they go. I want those who

are anxious to hear the angel's words 'do not be afraid'. And I want the politicians to discover what it means to lead with humility and confidence.

As I said to the children when they visited on Friday, this nativity story is only just the beginning, the baby grows up and his life is one of adventure, great meaning and example, and the ultimate purpose of saving us all from the darkness and sin we are all quite good at creating. The Christmas story is only just the beginning of the story of Jesus. He is at the heart of the story, what Jesus said and did are all hinted at in the nativity, we are properly introduced to him and the impact his life will have. As we hear the story again through carols and concerts, music and candlelight, children and tea towels, let's please focus on the baby Jesus - he started Christmas, and is the only one who can ever save it.

I hope you have a safe and happy celebration - find joy in the feasting, meaning in the worship, light in the darkness, and peace in the stillness of starry nights.

Your superintendent minister and friend,

Rev Rob Hilton

*Please forward information to be put into the next Circuit Newsletter to Daniel Keen, [1108info.cheshiresouth@gmail.com](mailto:1108info.cheshiresouth@gmail.com) or phone 07598 580541 by Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> January – Thank you*