

## **Watchnight Address 2016**

Earlier this week I had the privilege of attending a Christmas Service and nativity play performed by the pupils of a special school in Edinburgh. The school provides education for secondary pupils with learning disabilities. On arrival, the church was filled with vibrant organ music and the pews were packed with pupils, parents, family and friends. There was a real buzz in the air - great excitement - and hugs of welcome were shared in the aisles. Set in a local church, the play began with a procession of children adorned in Christmas costumes: angels, shepherds, wise men, sheep, Joseph and Mary entered the sanctuary. The play was replete with songs and narration. With pride and clarity, Joseph asked the innkeeper if there was a spare room to be had for the night? Later, in the cave, under the night sky, Mary held the baby, close and tightly. As the service drew to a close, quoting from the Gospel of St Luke, the headteacher spoke of wisdom and the urgent need for wisdom in our world.

In November, I attended the Christmas fair which was held in that same special school. The school hall was filled with pupils and stalls,

light and warmth, staff and families. Some pupils greeted one another and spoke to visitors; others were less forthcoming, but present and pleased to be there. As if in a moment of meditation, standing in the centre of that hall, filled as it was with human beings whose brokenness is more evident to the eye than usual, whose warmth and welcome reveal no false mask, I saw this community as a sign of God's country, a place where the values of heaven are present, incarnated. I know that the lives of some of these young people can be difficult and so too those of their parents, but in that community there is humanity, authenticity, mutual understanding and compassion. With the eyes of faith, it is God-filled.

By contrast, our cultural values increasingly favour the faked over the unfaked. In 1997, in the United States, a study revealed that the most popular values among 9 to 11 year olds were community feeling and benevolence. Fame came 15<sup>th</sup> out of the 16 values tested. By 2007, fame came first, followed by achievement, image, popularity and financial success. Community feeling had fallen to 11<sup>th</sup> and benevolence to 12<sup>th</sup>. A paper in the International Journal of Cultural Studies found that, among the people it surveyed in the UK, those who follow celebrity gossip most closely are three times less

likely than people interested in other forms of news to be involved in local organisations, and half as likely to volunteer.<sup>1</sup> A survey of 16-year-olds in the UK revealed that 54% of them intend to become celebrities. One columnist writes:

You don't have to read or watch many interviews to see that the principal qualities now sought in a celebrity are vapidness, vacuity and physical beauty. They can be used as a blank screen on to which anything can be projected. With a few exceptions, those who have least to say are granted the greatest number of platforms on which to say it.

In an age of populism, of Trump and possible nuclear proliferation, of the rise of narrow nationalism rather than patriotism, of division and individuality rather than unity and community, the school hall and the nativity play are signs of a better world. The contrast could not be greater.

The Christmas story is a carefully crafted faith narrative weaving together politics and spirituality. Set in the violence of the first century, under the brutal leadership of Caesar Augustus and the despot client king, Herod the Great, the birth of Jesus is a story framed to contrast directly with the value system of the Roman Empire.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Guardian* George Monbiot 20 December, 2016

Caesar Augustus was the 'son of God', the 'saviour of the world' and the one who 'brought good news to the world' and 'peace on earth'. The Early Church used the same language of Jesus but this time to show a different kingdom, a different reign, one modelled on the life of the rabbi from Nazareth. The Jesus kingdom is one in which humanity dignity is treasured, the less able are cared for and, as seen so often in the life of Jesus, women are treated as equals to men.

Though written in the poetic language of mythology, the Christmas message means peace on earth through honouring the Sacred, the Holy, shining in the face of other human beings, of faith and no faith, working always for reconciliation and resisting the temptation of violence, violence in language as well as physical violence. As Western societies potentially become less stable, as political leadership appears to diminish, the need to protect Human Rights grows stronger. The driving force behind the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights was the Christian Eleanor Roosevelt. Called the 'First Lady of the World', in 1946 Roosevelt said:

We stand today at the threshold of a great event both

in the life of the United Nations and in the life of [humankind].  
This declaration may well become the international Magna  
Carta for all [people] everywhere.

The Christmas story is about embodying a better world.

Amen.

We stand to sing the carol *Still the Night*. Mindful that 2016 marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of the Somme and mindful too of the loss of life in Berlin, the Chamber Group will sing the first verse in German. Let us stand.