

Second Sunday in Advent 2018 (Evensong)

Isaiah 40: 1 – 11; Luke 1: 1 – 25

I'm sure I'm not the first person, or the last person, to say if you want to find Jesus, the last place to bother looking is inside the church! In fact, I'm sure people have said that in different ways.

Some people will say it with bitterness and pain because of hurt that has been caused to them at church. The people who populate church congregations are fallible human beings who are just as capable of being either cruel and spiteful or crass and thoughtless as anyone else. And I suspect that the level of offence that is caused at church at least equals if not outstrips any other institution. And, of course, we also know that churches are easy targets for sexual predators to lurk and for abuse to take place. There are astonishing numbers of people who have been severely damaged by their experiences of church; and

that is why there is having to be such a step-change in the culture of our approach to safeguarding.

On the other hand, though, when other people say the last place you'd expect to find Jesus is in church they might be saying it for completely different reasons. They might be saying it because of radical theological convictions about the significance of the incarnation. We're going to be hearing in a few weeks' time that the Wise Men were way off beam when they went looking for Jesus in a royal palace in Jerusalem: they should have been looking somewhere behind a pub in scruffy, provincial Bethlehem. Similarly today, the argument goes, if you want to find Jesus, don't go looking for him amidst gothic arches and stained glass and robed choirs: look for him in the face of the poor and the oppressed, the marginalised and the homeless; look for him where there are discarded needles and other detritus of addiction; where there's violence and neglect; and hunger and fuel poverty. That's where the Christ-child is to be found. And if we're not beginning

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to get our heads round that, we're not working at our Advent discipline very hard.

But, when all that is said and done, in the opening passages of Luke's Gospel that we've heard read this evening, he is at pains to establish that the credentials of the story that's about to unfold are dependent on being rooted in the institution of the Jewish tradition. The passage we've read sets the scene. And it's full of details. They may seem to us like gratuitous and boring details. But they are all triggers to help us get in the right frame of mind for what's coming.

If I ask whether you've heard about the horse that went into the pub and asked for a pint of beer, you all know by the very convention I've used to introduce the story, that what I'm telling you is going to be a joke. You know that it would be a category error on your part to start challenging me in the impossibility of horses ordering pints of beer. It's not relevant. The

only thing that is relevant is whether the punch line is worth laughing at.

By the same token, you know that if I ask you whether you're sitting comfortably and then explain that a long, long time ago a beautiful princess lived in a far-away land, you know how to approach what I'm telling you: you know to be settling into a lovely heart-warming story that's going to make you feel all snug and better able to get to sleep.

That's how this opening passage of Luke's gospel operates. It tells us how to listen to the story. It's a story, spread over this Gospel and the second volume in the book of Acts, that's going to take us to places we wouldn't expect Jewish tradition to go: the abandonment of circumcision and ritual food laws in far flung places across the entire known world. But it can't work unless it starts in the institution of the Jewish tradition. And so we have themes and patterns from the Old Testament. We have the casting of lots, a

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vision in the temple, a heavenly messenger, a promise, a sign, and a childless old couple. We've them all before in spades full, from Abraham to Jonah and loads of others in between. And there are details about lineage and Levitical divisions and liturgical rotas and ritual. But none of it is gratuitous or irrelevant. It's all meant to make us prick up our ears and realise that however shocking and unexpected, however innovative and pioneering what follows might be, it is all part of one continuous development of what God has been doing among his people for centuries past.

And that's how it is for us. The Christ-child will be found in the darkest corners of society. The church will have to start operating in ways that are certainly innovative and pioneering and may well be shocking and unexpected. This week – this very week: news hot off the press – this week the Diocese of York has successfully secured £3m of Church Commissioners' funding to do pioneering ministry among the 20s to 40s age group. There's going to be a minister

appointed to Bridlington to spear head this in our community. This is a generation that has no cultural connection with church or faith tradition whatsoever. So doing what we do now but a bit slicker, with a bit of better communication and digital technology thrown in, isn't going to achieve anything. So what's going to have to be done is going to have to be completely new. But it's going to be all part of one continuous development of what God has been doing in this community for centuries past.

So it must all be rooted in us continuing to tell the story, to maintain the ritual, to break the bread and share the cup together. It must start here. But it mustn't be kept here. We maintain our vigil to unlock God's Spirit so that it's released in our lives of service and into the community in which we live, locally and nationally. So let us join our Archbishop in prayer for the meaningful vote on the Brexit withdrawal agreement; let us open our hearts and apply our minds to redeeming the squalor and naked careerism in our

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national politics; and let us commit ourselves to the healing of wounds and brokenness in our own community.

Amen.