



**Isaiah 40.1-8**

**Mark 1.1-8**

**25<sup>th</sup> December 2020 CHRISTMAS DAY**

## **Small Christmas?**

### **First Talk**

We have all got familiar with using some old words more often, and some new words for the first time this year.

The Global Language Monitor has recently announced that COVID is the top word for 2020 – which is probably the least surprising news of the year!

Other words that we now use on a daily basis would be: Face Mask, Social Distancing and, of course, Lockdown – which is either one or two words, I'm still not sure!

Most Sundays in church we hear the word GOSPEL and often it's the second reading in the service. Indeed, each church year is named after a gospel with the current one being The Year of Mark.

The word 'gospel' literally means Good News and on a day such as today we remember this was exactly what the angels said they were announcing to the shepherds on Christmas night. They said, or sang, that they had come to bring Good News that a Saviour had been born in Bethlehem.

Martin Luther, thought to be the author of Away in a Manger, also said that the Bible is the Manger that holds Christ.

It's a lovely thought. Perhaps take your bible and hold it in the cup of your hand, as it falls open in a V formation it looks a bit like a manger, and remember it's still Good News that we can meet Jesus in the pages and stories of the Gospel.

## Second Talk

There's a lot about Christmas 2020 that is smaller than usual.

The tree in The Sanctuary is half its normal size, yet it's been beautifully set up and decorated by Beryl and Ray adding light and colour to our services.

There will be smaller gatherings around today's lunch tables for many families and of course, over recent Sundays the carols in all churches and cathedrals have been sung by smaller choirs and listened to by smaller congregations.

Yet, as we learnt with so many things over this exceptional year, maybe doing things differently has its plus points.

There is something appropriate in a small Christmas when we remember the one at the centre of our celebrations was a small new-born baby. At the time of his birth many would have considered his arrival inconsequential. He never even got issued a birth certificate and no documents from Antiquity have ever been discovered telling us how much he weighed!

As the Rocking Carol puts it: *Little Jesus, sweetly sleep, do not stir...*

The Magi were perhaps the first who learnt the reality of a downsized Christmas. They travelled from the East, prompted by prophesy and star gazing, expecting fanfares in palaces. Yet after calling on Herod they reassessed the situation eventually lowering their sights, but not their worship and devotion, as they met up with the Christ child in much humbler circumstances.

We too, I think, can still meet Jesus in a smaller Christmas, indeed our meeting just might be more meaningful in such a context.

After all, it's the vulnerability of this baby that speaks to our hearts, perhaps never more so than this year.

There in Bethlehem, just as anywhere and at any time all over the world, this new born begins his story as a child completely dependent upon his young, exhausted, confused yet loving parents.

The only reason the Holy Family are in Bethlehem at all is because the government of the day has intervened in their lives and declared a Census to be carried out, each male returning to his home town for registration.

After the birth of Jesus, their life and his will be quickly, and brutally, interrupted by Herod whose insanity brings about the Slaughter of the Innocents, meaning that Joseph and Mary, instead of returning home to Nazareth, flee to Egypt.

Do any of those themes seem familiar? Learning to live with dependence on others, following instructions issued by government and having our best laid plans changed - this was the experience of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, and in some ways, it has also been ours in 2020.

There is a sort of contradiction in both the life of Jesus and our own lives, that sometimes the smallest actions have the biggest and most profound consequences.

In many ways the encounters Jesus has in the gospel are often a series of small ones. Today's press and media would probably be looking out for the big themes and showcase events and miss these one on one moments. Interesting, then, that the gospel writers include them in alongside the bigger episodes such as Christ's baptism or transfiguration.

How did it feel, I wonder, to those with a skin disease which made them outcasts, to have Jesus touch you? What impact might it have on those mothers, initially turned away by overprotective disciples, when Jesus made time to sit down and talk to their children, offering them a blessing before they left? And how did it change the life of the women at the well who drew water at the hottest time of the day, to have a not so accidental meeting with

Jesus who spoke to her about the Water of Life?

These could almost be described as backstage encounters, yet to everyone concerned they seemed anything but inconsequential, instead they were life changing and life enhancing.

Sometimes, and we all know this because we have probably experienced it, the smallest encounters can have the profoundest consequences.

So much seems to have shrunk this year and we understand, and appreciate, why it's had to be like this. Yet, alongside much heartache, loss and struggle, there have been times when the absence of so much we once took for granted has distilled down, for us, something which, though smaller, is more intense. In our vulnerability we have refocused on how interconnected life is: we need each other. Stripped away of so much it's become a little easier for us to see what really matters. In some, but not all ways, less has potentially become more.

The tree in our Sanctuary at AFC seems entirely appropriate this year and is, in itself, a valuable message that smaller, paradoxically, doesn't always mean less.

Of course, Christmas always reminds us that God came among us in weakness and humility.

I was reminded of that, perversely enough, on one of the hottest days this summer. We were on holiday spending a few days in Gloucestershire and one morning, before the temperature rose too far up the thermometer, we drove, then walked to the source of the great River Thames.

We've walked, over a few years, every step of the north and south bank of the Thames in central London from Putney to Greenwich. It's been a regular Saturday activity for us, so I was intrigued to see where this great river, central to our nation's story begins its journey.

Well, if you've ever made that same pilgrimage you'll know it all

begins in such an insignificant, out of the way place in a field in Gloucestershire. It is quite a hike to get there and when you do there is nothing to see because the Thames starts its life quietly and unseen, underground. Yet a plaque has been erected, beside which, of course, we and the dog had our photo taken.

From something so small, so insignificant eventually grows the most famous river in Britain.

On this Christmas Day 2020, we give thanks for those small things in our lives that have meant the most to us this year, and as we too kneel at the manger this morning we worship this vulnerable, dependent new born baby in whom dwells the wisdom of the ages and the hopes of all our years to come.

From such a small beginning comes a life that has changed and blessed our world for ever.

Thanks be to God for his unspeakable gift of the Christ-child of Bethlehem.

Amen

*Ian Green, Amersham, December 2020*