

St Peter's, Ealing
Christmas Eve
Midnight Mass
Tuesday 24th December 2019

Waiting for God.

One of my earliest childhood Christmas memories is being perplexed at the news. My Dad was an avid news watcher, in the good old days when there were two bulletins a day. He would watch them both, on the BBC of course. As you may imagine, as a 5 or 6-year-old I used to find all this news watching pretty tedious. When it clashed with something I wanted to watch or even worse, when news events supplanted my programmes, I was pretty annoyed.

This particular Christmas, for some reason or other, I was more aware of the news being on at Christmas. The news report was of a war somewhere. I couldn't understand why they were fighting on Christmas Day. There must have been something wrong. Didn't they know it was a holiday? Didn't they know everything should stop for Christmas? Christmas is a time of presents, extra chocolate, Christmas trees and eating things at odd time just because you could, and your Mum wouldn't tell you off. How were they going to hear the Queen's speech if they were fighting? Hasn't God told them to stop? Why can't God tell them to stop? Why does God allow this to happen anyway?

I guess this was all rather memorable because this was when my childhood Christmas bubble burst. I had to think through these things. I had to work out how big and different the world was. That for some there is no such thing as Christmas. That what I did wasn't necessarily what others did. In this there was a lingering question of God's part in all this. Was God allowing the bad stuff? Was God doing the bad stuff?

In my job I sit at many bedsides. I hold peoples' hands. I am there when their life seems to be crumbling into dust. A few of us sat at the bedside of an elderly parishioner as she slowly passed away earlier this year. Her body broken by osteoarthritis, all she kept asking was for God to take her, 'why won't God take me?' was her constant question. She had had enough of life and yet here she was still, physically, emotionally and mentally broken.

On another occasion, as a relative lay in bed enduring months of chemotherapy only to be told the treatment hadn't worked the family asked 'why?'; 'why had God allowed this? Why did God do this to people?'

Then there was baby Laurence. Born prematurely, struggling for life, I baptised him on Christmas Eve. Having held him in my hand, for that is how small he was, baptising him in the name of the Triune God, his mother looked at me and silently asking why – where is God?

I have had many years to ponder these questions; questions blaming God for the ills of the world; and it makes sense. After all, if God is all powerful and eternal; if God is the creator and master of all things how come these things happen? If God is real why does God allow awful things to happen in the world?

The nativity story that begins in the Garden of Eden and our relationship with God, for that is what the story is about, God's love for us, our love for God and yet our disobedience and our turning away from God. It is we who walk away from God not God who walks away from us. It is this breakup in our relationship that God has struggled over ever since; a struggle we don't begin to understand until eventually God is born in Bethlehem; born of flesh and blood; born as one of us, saying, 'this is how much I love you. I love you and I want to be in your life.' Being born in human form God is part of our life. As Jesus God shares in our grief and our joy; our pain and our delight. It is God who now understands an infant's consternation at a confusing world; teenage angst at the complexities of puberty; adult fear and anger at the pressures of life with all its vagaries; the pain of mourning as he buries loved ones and ultimately the sense of abandonment as he cries from the cross, "Eli eli lema sabachthani? My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27.46) and of course ultimately death.

When we ask the questions of why God allows or does or whatever awful thing in this world, we ask the wrong question, or rather we look in the wrong place.

Beginning in the stable in Bethlehem we see that in our own lives, in our pain and our joy God is there with us, alongside us, understanding in a way no one else can. God knows our pain because he has been there; he is there in it. God is in our suffering with us, holding us, caring for us because he suffered for us.

God is also in our joy because God most definitely partied. He has celebrated life in all its wonderfulness too. He has danced at weddings, celebrated at family parties and gathered around a table, breaking bread and sharing a cup of wine with family and friends in love and fellowship.

In the joy of the stable he shares in our joys and wonder. From this stable God is with us always, in every corner of our lives, good or ill, not doing the bad stuff but holding us during the bad stuff. Dancing at our parties, loving us to the end.