

Long ago, in the days when people shook hands with each other without a second thought, and we never worried about how close we were standing to someone when we talked to them, someone I'd never seen before came up to me after Midnight Mass and said: 'I only come once a year and I'm very disappointed. Why didn't you read the Christmas story?' It's never a great idea to argue on the church steps and even less so at half-past midnight, so I swallowed several possible responses, smiled sweetly and wished them a Happy Christmas, and they disappeared. Of course, if you came to the carol service last week or if you come at ten tomorrow morning, you will hear what I think they meant by the 'Christmas story'. If you come on other Sundays you will hear more of the story, because Jesus isn't just for Christmas. And if, by any chance, you are the person who asked me in the first place, I apologise for avoiding your question. Perhaps in the next few minutes I can give you a decent answer.

All good stories work on a number of levels. Most obviously, the boy gets the girl, or Miss Marple unravels the mystery, or the poor family finds something that restores their fallen fortunes. Underneath there is a more abstract theme: the victory of good over evil, the virtue of unselfishness, the reward for sticking to one's principles in the face of adversity. Children read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* as a wonderful fantasy. Adults see C.S. Lewis's strong Christian faith underpinning the narrative. Yet these are literally stories, fiction, constructs of human imagination. The 'Christmas story' can – indeed must – also be read at different levels. But unlike the tales of Narnia, or of Arthur and his round table knights, it is true. The 'Christmas story' my questioner wanted to hear is a historical narrative: 'In those days a decree went out from the emperor Augustus...there was a census...Mary and Joseph went from Nazareth to Bethlehem...she gave birth to her first son...the shepherds found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in a manger'. A specific time, identifiable places that still exist, named people. A series of statements setting out hard facts which describe real events. But, on their own, so what? Why has this little story about a couple of people travelling to comply with a Roman census lasted so long? Why did anyone even bother to write it down? What on earth makes it so special that, 2000 years later, we come together unusually late at night to hear and celebrate it?

Well, it's 'what in heaven' makes it so special, and our readings tonight are the deeper level that makes sense of the historical vignette. As St Paul explained to the Hebrews (the Jews) in our second reading, 'Long ago God spoke to our ancestors through prophets'. Our first reading is one example of this: the prophet Isaiah telling the Israelites (Jewish ancestors) who have been kicked out of their ancestral lands and driven into exile, that God has not abandoned them. Our third reading, the first verses of John's gospel, explains exactly why the 'Christmas story' of that birth in a little village in what is now Palestine is so important. God wants there to be no barriers between him and his people, so he has sent his Word – his Light – into the world. But people find it hard to build a relationship with Word or with Light, and the more dazzling the light, the harder it is for people to get close to it. So, as John says a little later in his gospel: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that all who believe in him should have everlasting life'.

God sends his light in the person of his son. He wants us to be able to approach and accept the light, so he sends it in the most appealing, least threatening way possible, in the form of a newborn baby. Not born in a royal palace, surrounded by midwives and attendants, with guards to keep ordinary people away. No high-status parents to bring the child up in luxury, wanting for nothing and at a safe distance from the rest of us. This light – this God incarnate – this child of heaven in human form – is given to us as the child of a village craftsman and his fiancée who couldn't find anywhere to stay. God wants us to see the light, to be inspired, he wants us to

believe, wants us to accept his salvation. Many did not do so then; many do not do so today. 'But...', says John, and it is a huge 'but'. 'But to all who believed him he gave power to become children of God.'

But some did believe, some do believe, and some will believe. As the advertisements never tire of telling us, Christmas is a time for giving. We spend vast amounts of time and money buying, wrapping, posting and giving Christmas presents, trying to find the perfect gift, trying to please everyone. But there is nothing sadder than a gift which is offered and ignored or rejected. Alongside all the noise and bustle God stands, offering us the perfect gift: his love, his light, his son, his salvation. All we have to do is to say: 'Amen. Lord, I believe'. Or, in the words of the carol: 'What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what I can I give him, give my heart.'