

Titus 3:4-7 and Luke 2: 1-7

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

I wonder what chaos would be caused if someone on high decreed that all of us needed to return to our home towns to be registered in a census. For many of us, that would mean a long car or train journey. For quite a few of us, it would mean flying out to another country. For a very small number it would be totally impossible – with so many wars in the last century, towns have been obliterated, and boundaries have changed to such a degree that whole countries have ceased to exist.

Those who are refugees know acutely and painfully just how drastically and quickly a home town can change. A Christian friend whose Jewish family fled Europe in the 1940s recounts how they were asked why they never returned to the particular strand of Judaism their family practiced. Their answer was simple and stark. The form of Judaism their family followed no longer exists. With the destruction of home and place, religious traditions and cultural practices were also lost. My friend could not “go home” in any sense – geographical, spiritual or cultural; home did not exist. That Jewish family could only move forward into a new life and find God afresh in a new era and a new place. That, we remember today, is the lot of nearly a million who this year have found home, country and oppressors so appalling that they have decided the ocean in an overcrowded perilous vessel is less dangerous.

What is true in a dramatic way for refugees is true in a small way for all of us. My home town of Darlaston – that’s near Wolverhampton, by the way - is recognizable to me still, but of course it has changed in ways that I am very apparent. I will never recapture of the world of fifty and sixty odd years ago, yet it retains a powerful hold on my heart and my imagination.

So as I ponder Joseph’s long walk home to Bethlehem with heavily pregnant Mary, in my idle moments I wonder how Joseph would feel if he were alive now, and turned his face back to Nazareth where he lived, and to Bethlehem, his town of origin. Since I’ve been there this year, I know he would find that the small rural village of Nazareth has become a busy city with markets and eating places and noise and traffic. He would perhaps find a few shepherds in the outlying fields practising the ancient skills, albeit with the countryside scarred by the high steel-mesh fence which is the rural equivalent of the concrete wall across the city. Walking to Bethlehem would, in a very different way, be just perilous. Walls and armed soldiers present a daunting gauntlet to anyone seeking entrance and I doubt Joseph would now be able to navigate the built up streets.

For all that we sing songs harking back to the “little town of Bethlehem” lying serenely beneath the stars silently awaiting the Christ child, there really is no going back, even if that were the reality all those years ago. That place, the place Joseph called Bethlehem, no longer exists as he and Mary knew it. We can still pin point the place on the map but that’s where it ends. Culturally, spiritually, physically, politically, all has changed.

So where does that leave us as we celebrate Christ’s birth? Again, I turn to my friend whose family were refugees for help. When I ask where home is, this friend will not refer me to the place of their birth or the place they now live. Geography doesn’t come into it. Instead, they will say “at the altar” or kneeling in prayer, or in the arms of someone they cherish. Home is no longer about a physical location. It is about a spiritual relationship; the tie of a close friend; the glimpse of the sacred as it breaks into life.

Just so for us as we celebrate Christmas. It is good to tell the story, to remember how Jesus came to be born in a stable long ago. It’s good to go on pilgrimage to Bethlehem, to see the shape of the landscape and remember the history. But if we want to find the Christ-child who is born again today, we must look to the present not to the past. We must be open to how Christ appears among us in our own time, and in unexpected places. We must be willing to welcome him as we glimpse him in the eyes of a stranger

or as we embrace someone we know and love. We must be willing to journey forwards into the future offering our gifts, our time and talents in his service as he grows up in our midst, and as we learn to become his disciples. Then we can then proclaim that with Jesus we are at home.

Happy Christmas. I pray that as you go home to your families or perhaps to a quiet day by yourself, you will find God newly alive in your midst, and rejoice.