

Christmas Day Sermon 2012
preached by the Bishop of Portsmouth,
The Rt Revd Christopher Foster,
in Portsmouth Cathedral

Why have we come from our mainly comfortable situations – the homes to which most of us will return in an hour or so – to mark an event with such a profoundly different setting from ours? Indeed, we do more than mark, we celebrate this extraordinary event in a far away place, a couple of millennia ago, as a baby is born to a young woman at the end of a long and uncomfortable journey. You and I might think it has little to do with our lives and challenges.

The account we hear and celebrate is of a birth, in an emergency location, apparently without planning. And the visits that followed the birth in temporary makeshift accommodation seemed similarly to be if not random then certainly unpredictable. It is all more disordered than our Christmas and our lives seem to be.

As we worship this morning, or as you read on Twitter the series of 140 character snippets from this sermon, I invite you to ponder with me the discontinuity as well as the attraction of the nativity. Of course parts of the Christmas story are heart-warming and touching. We like to suppose that the innkeeper was human and soft-hearted enough to find pregnant Mary a place somewhere in a crowded town, and few of us are not emotional around a new-born baby.

But the discontinuities with our own circumstances seem striking, at least at first, and they set the pattern for the rest of Jesus' life and his death. It is not just the simplicity of the setting we notice - perhaps it's better to say that it was a humble setting, away from home and family, support and comfort, but also the visits by rough-sleeping shepherds and by foreign magi.

This the church, Christians, those of us here in the Cathedral this morning or tweeting, celebrate with joy! Because this is how God comes to us, and this is how he speaks to us, in action as well as in word, to bring us all good news.

Of course, Jesus' arrival among us in a humble stable should not make us glib about poverty – other people's or our own. This morning 75,000 children in our country wake up in emergency accommodation; Jesus' early days were in similarly provisional circumstances and Christmas signals not only divine solidarity with them, it invites us who come to worship to bring our vulnerability too. Despite the security we may enjoy, few of us do not feel prey to the decisions of others and vulnerable to uncertainties and fears, pushed into a place or a relationship which is uncomfortable or wounding or abusive. Before a helpless vulnerable baby, born frighteningly far from home and security, we can worship with honesty about our deepest fears.

Today, like most days, many of our churches – and cathedrals too – open their doors to those who do not come from comfortable homes but from rough-sleeping on the streets and from the margins of society. Jesus' first visitors were shepherds from the fields, misfits who seemed to prefer the company of sheep to the conventionality of town and village life. Those most visibly excluded and marginalised in our communities are clearly dignified by God as today's successors to the shepherds. Less noticeably we are too, for I think most of us have experience of being outsiders and feeling left out of what others seem to enjoy or

the opportunities for fulfilment and success. We are welcomed this morning with the shepherds as we offer our lack of confidence and our sometimes-not-belonging.

The wise men too – if I may briefly anticipate the visit of the magi which we celebrate on Epiphany, the twelfth day of Christmas – came and worshipped, offering gifts to the Christ-child. Not only does God remind us that all, from every nation and background, are valued and respected at the manger and so everywhere, but their part in this story reminds us how unwittingly we can cause havoc and distress. Their persistence in journeying and their willingness to seek advice, from Herod, made them the hapless cause of the slaughter of all children under two in and around Bethlehem. Today we offer to Jesus our gifts and strengths, and we are aware that God accepts knowing the suffering and hurt we have inflicted, perhaps unintentionally, on others.

We have come today, and we celebrate, not because the nativity of Jesus is consistent with our lives and our world, not because it matches directly our circumstances, but because here we can be true to ourselves, honest before God who is vulnerable in a helpless voiceless baby. God shows us today his solidarity with frightened people, like those children in emergency accommodation; he gives dignity to people who are outcast, marginalised and looked-down on; he reiterates that all are welcome, however mistrusted, at the manger and in the kingdom. And God through Jesus today accepts your sorrows and hurts, and mine, the vulnerability and disappointments we bear.

That is Christmas good news. Now we are ready for the turning upside down of our lives in service of God who reveals so much through this baby. Jesus' life was true to God, even as far as the cross. God is with us, Christmas proclaims. As we say and sing that, it can be a true for us as we dare to be the person God makes and loves.

Nicola Slee puts it this way in her poem, 'Christmas crib'

*Before the crib I kneel to pray:
Still centre of a rocking, reeling world.
This child, this mother and man
Here strip me, show me as I am.*

This morning God reveals himself to us in this baby. Amidst the festivities and celebrations of the day, may we use this time of worship to dare to put down our defences in the presence of the newborn Christ. We receive Jesus as God's gift to us, and offer to him the gift of ourselves, in our deepest vulnerability and our deepest beauty.

+Christopher