Christmas Day
Saint Mary the Virgin, Saint Briavels, 2019

Isaiah 52:7-10
John 1:1-14

Lord Jesus, light of the world, born in David’s city of Bethlehem; born like him to be a king, be born in our hearts this Christmas time, be King of our lives today. Amen.

The Christmas crib in Salisbury Cathedral tends to make the news every year. I don’t mean, you know, the front page of the Sun or something, but it does turn up most years in the middle of the newspaper, and this year has been no exception.

The crib scene throughout the whole of my time there as one of the priests of the cathedral was this enormous Papier mache design. It had every single figure you could imagine in it, all of them at least life-size, and all of them frankly rather odd. I think charitably you would refer to the style as ‘rustic.’ The Shepherd for example was gnarled and wizened. The three wise men were vibrantly coloured in golds, reds and greens. One of them had an enormous round hat on his head, and some of us, behind-the-scenes, used to refer to him as Mr Onion Head! The angels were frankly terrifying. They were enormous, with great staring eyes and arms reaching out. One newspaper, reviewing our Christmas crib a few years ago, simply noted: “Salisbury Cathedral appears to have made the decision to just leave up their Halloween decorations!”

The same year that I moved on from the cathedral, the crib was retired, as it was becoming harder and harder to repair and refurbish each year. And while they decide what they’re going to do long-term, this year instead they have done something radically different: members of the congregation and the wider community of the cathedral, people like the stonemasons, the guides and so on, have been photographed, and then those photographs of been blown up onto enormous almost floor-to-ceiling length semi-transparent hangings, which dangle from the roof in the centre of the church to present this rather wonderful modern nativity scene: all the angels, shepherds, Mary, Joseph and even the baby himself hang right in the centre of the church glowing with colour, but also looking very modern, with recognisable faces from the community. Understandably some of the newspapers have loved it, and some have mocked it as being the height of trendy kitsch.

But you know it’s made me look again at the Christmas crib. And there’s a reason why we began this morning by blessing the crib: by focusing our attention on it. Because in the Christmas crib we see the truth about what today’s all about. And actually you can see this truth in any crib: perhaps a picture on the front of one of the Christmas cards that you’ve popped up on a shelf for the Christmas season, or maybe you have a manger scene yourself at home, or the one here in church. We see deep truth in this scene which is at once so simple, and yet so extraordinary.

Because what we see is all the reality of what it means to be human people, and especially the reality of those who at this Christmas season are away from home, maybe homeless, or in prison, or hospital, or separated from their loved ones by an ocean. We see the kindness of strangers: an innkeeper lending his barn to some travellers. We see the natural world that it is our duty to care for, in the animals. We see poverty: we see a baby who doesn’t have a cot, or a room specially prepared. All he has to sleep in is the food trough of some animals who have lent him that space to take his first few moments of sleep. There is human reality in this scene. There is the best and the worst of us in it. A young family, unmarried mother, forced by government legislation to be on the road when they really
should have been at home surrounded by familiar things at the
time of giving birth. There’s kindness of strangers, hospitality,
and people being totally surprised by this scene that they
encounter. On one level it is the story of humanity.

And yet. And yet. What we also see is God. We see God
Almighty, the creator of everything, the author of the world, the
King of the universe, coming to meet his people. And not just
coming to meet them, but coming to be with them, as one of
them. To be with us, as one of us.

God is so interested in you, God is so interested in me, God is so
committed to this relationship, that he empties himself of
everything that would seem to be important about being a God,
you know crowns and thrones and power and all that kind of
thing, he empties himself of all of that, and comes to meet us
exactly as we are. One of the givens of every one of our lives is
that it began as a baby. That is where we begin. So that is where
God begins as well. And because human life is fragile, and some
of it is marked with sadness, loneliness, poverty, and all the
being shoved about that life often visits upon us, that is how
God begins his life as well. In a borrowed manger, in an
unfamiliar place, in the dark, dependent on the kindness of
strangers.

So in one sense it is so familiar, as in the other sense it is
absolutely extraordinary.

But it shows us how much God loves us. Christmas is of course
about gifts. Christmas is about something that we don’t deserve,
and don’t earn, being given to us anyway. You know, if later on
this morning I hand over my Christmas presents to my wife
Emma, and as she opens them I sit opposite her looking hard at
the receipt, that’s not going to feel very much like a gift is it. If,
even as she is opening the thing that I’ve given to her, she can
see me examining how much it cost me, how much money I was
willing to exchange for this present, that’s going to make you
feel pretty awful. That isn’t how you and I give gifts to each
other. Gifts are freely given. They are not earned. Or they
shouldn’t be.

Just so the gift of Christmas. There’s nothing transactional about
this. This isn’t God saying, okay well, if you promise to do this,
this and this, then I will maybe love you a little bit. But I’ll be
checking all the time that you can remember how much it cost
me to do this.

Mangers don’t look like that to me. Neither do shepherds.
Neither do homeless families. And neither does a newborn baby.

When we look at the Christmas crib, it can be very impressive
and full of quite scary angels, like the old crib at Salisbury. And
that’s good because it reminds us that something awesome is
happening. Something that ought to make us amazed, and even
maybe a little bit of mighty dread is not wrong. But we also see
something familiar, a bit more like the new crib that Salisbury
have put up, with faces that you recognise around the manger.
Because we see our story in the story of the holy family. We see
the story of our culture, of our nation, of our world in this
mishmash of people, refugees, the poorest, the richest, people
who own their own Inn and people who have to sleep on the
floor of the barn.

And in the middle of it we see God. Coming among us as a
baby. Loving us enough to begin at the beginning with us.
Trusting us not to drop him. Saying to us, I would love to take
the journey of life with you. Would you like to take the journey
with me?

Amen.