

Sermon on Christmas Day 2018 at The Cathedral

The Bishop of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich, The Rt Revd Martin Seeley

Readings: Heb 1: 1-4; John 1: 1-14

*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.*

It is with a sense of huge relief that I tumble into Christmas. Not just for the celebrations, not just for it coming at the turning of the year or the end of a long hard stint since the Summer, but because of what God gives us Christmas after Christmas, year after year: the gift of real hope. All those great Christmas proclamations – light in the darkness, peace on earth, good will to all, God with us, the word became flesh – they are all declarations of the real hope we are given at Christmas. One fifth century pope called this the Birthday of Life. It is for me the birthday of truth, of reality, of meaning, of purpose. Christmas is when goodness is born because God has become among us.

I don't think I have felt this so keenly as I do this year. I feel acutely our urgent need, the world's urgent need for real hope, and for truth and goodness in a way I have not felt before.

Let me give you an image. The Gatwick shut down. I have been haunted by this, I think because of what it represents in our world, what it says to us about us, and it catches something deep about our human condition, and points me mysteriously to why we are here today.

Sightings of a dark indistinct spot in the sky, and 140,000 people are stranded, and increasingly distressed, frustrated, anxious and angry, trapped. They feel abandoned, with no information, seemingly nowhere to turn. Families separated, people not able to meet up with loved ones, with friends, and with plans gone awry. People cowed and controlled by a dark indistinct spot in the sky. No direction, mounting pressure, and underneath, fear.

It was just for a couple of days, but the signs of strain were there, and you wonder what would have happened if it had gone on much longer. Human beings under strain when their options are limited and they feel powerless can resort to terrifying and destructive behaviours. Passive for a while, and then the tinder is ignited. Echoes of Animal Farm. Living in fear.

And it is not just those who were trapped that seem powerless. Those with responsibility, with resources to tackle the challenge, seem stymied too. Even to the point of suggesting it

was never there; and arresting and exposing two who are apparently innocent. Actions shaped by fear.

That may be Gatwick, and a drone, but it is not just Gatwick and a drone. It is so much of our world right now, it seems our human condition. Human beings under strain when their options are limited resort to terrible and destructive behaviour.

We have only to glance at what is going on politically here and across the Atlantic to see that. Political systems committed to openness and reason trapped in ideologies and their trusted companion, fear.

And we can trace these patterns through history, and through our own experience and our own families and communities. Human beings trapped in our own worlds, not knowing where to turn, what is going to happen. And then start to lash out, one way or another. Sooner or later turning on one another, and on those unable to protect themselves.

Who suffers? Who suffers in societies that have lost their way? Jesus was very clear about this, in his words and his actions. The poorest, the sick, the marginal, the young, the elderly, the stranger, the refugee, the immigrant, the different. Targets for neglect, or targets for anger, they suffer, and we all suffer as the humanity we share is demeaned.

For the world, that one dark indistinct spot in the sky that causes us to live as if we are trapped, that has us cowed and controls us, we call sin. We are mesmerised by its message that is hard to decipher yet is strangely compelling. It is that state that removes hope from our horizon, that keeps us thinking we have to be our own answer to our own questions, we have to be our own explanation, self-made, with all meaning and value and purpose worked out for ourselves. And as for a creator – just a chance chemical event.

We may live this life well, it seems to work for many much of the time. But then something happens, and we realise something isn't right, fear creeps in.

And the creator looks at us in pity and mercy. He's tried mitigation, to revert to Gatwick language. Sent successions of mitigators, prophets, they were called, one after another, but to no lasting effect.

Their messages of turning back to God and practicing justice, of living lives of social mutuality, were forgotten or ignored almost as soon as they were uttered. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets." We were reminded in our first reading.

And so in ways we struggle to find words for, the creator becomes among us. What John's Gospel calls the Word, the creative agency of God, through whom everything exists, becomes among us, one of us – "And the Word became flesh and lived among us."

And this is for me is the extraordinary gift that makes hope real, that gives shape and meaning, that makes this the birthday of life. It is there in the great opening of John's Gospel and in the opening of the Letter to the Hebrews – when we think of Jesus we think not just of a human being who somehow reflects the divine, or is oddly filled with the divine, as if there were a space for that to happen.

Here we are brought face to face with the reality of the one coming among us who is the force of life and creation, the source of the order of the whole universe somehow manifest as a person in our history. Hebrews tells us, "He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things." And from John, "without him was not anything made that was made". Jesus is in ways we can barely grasp the source of everything. Indeed, the birthday of life.

This is what we celebrate, this year as every year, this year perhaps more than ever before. This is not about just responding to a new born, though it is that, of course. When we realise the immensity of who this little one is, we celebrate the hope that lifts us out of our trapped Gatwick world.

And we celebrate too because this is the one who will show us how to live, who will bring the order of the universe to our disordered world – he will show us how to live with one another, to love our neighbours, to handle power and wealth, to order society, to focus on the needs of the poor, to work for justice, and as the source of creation, he shows us to care for the world and our environment, created through him.

The birth of life is the birth of those ways that overcome our fear, that lift us out and into action, to live the way he lives for us, the way of mercy and pity, of compassion and justice.

And that indistinct spot in the sky, that source of our human disease, our disorientation, our distress, our fear, is still there, but it has no power and cannot control us, unless we choose to give it power. Instead, we turn and face the one who has come among us, born among us, Jesus Christ, by whom the universe comes into being, and by whom we have life. This is the birthday of life, the birthday of hope.