

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Christmas Midnight, 2018. Linton.

Out in the night, with bright light shining all around, and strains of singing in the air....

Because this is church, and it's Christmas, you may think I'm talking about the shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem. But I'm not. If you adjust your idea of what the bright light might be, and what strains of music might be all around, it's possible to use this description not just of the Bethlehem shepherds, but of young people going clubbing on a Friday or Saturday night in any of our town or city centres. Out on the town – not in the fields – and having a good time; but sometimes things can go wrong. Sometimes people out in the night can *need* a bit of shepherding. A girl's high-heel gets broken, and she limps along; maybe she takes her other shoe off, too. she may get separated from her friends. If she's had too much to drink, perhaps she's confused about how to get home, and begins to feel vulnerable and tearful. A few broken bottles on the pavement pose not just a threat to her bare feet, but also a temptation to the group nearby who are getting aggressive with each other. Things could turn ugly. But then the shepherds turn up: in many towns and cities, Street Pastors, or Town Pastors, are there with backpacks containing chocolate bars for people who need something to eat, water bottles, and flip-flops, for those who can't manage their shoes anymore. They offer listening ears and somewhere safe to go, somewhere warm to wait for a taxi, a hot drink and company. And, on the way, they stop to pick up the broken bottles and dispose of them safely.

They're there, without judgementalism – not police or social workers, but ordinary people of different ages, Christians who feel a call to minister sympathetically to people who are out in the night. They may sometimes offer to say a prayer with people – and it's surprising how often that is welcome – but they're not there to force anything on anyone.

Why do they do it? Because the Son of God came to be with people who are out in the night. The night-time economy of first century Palestine involved shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. In the twenty-first century in our country, it's more likely to involve clubbers and party-goers. He came with love for them all: 'goodwill towards men'. That's the message, - then and now.

But people were in a bad way when he came; trailing about the country at the behest of the authorities. Being registered for tax in a way which took absolutely no account of their well-being. The Christmas story tells of a woman in the late stages of pregnancy having to make a journey of 80 miles, with no obvious place to stay at the end just because the government decreed it. Presumably there were encounters with stony-faced soldiers and officials to be negotiated when she and her husband got there, and the threat of dreadful sanctions for those who didn't register properly on the right day or in the right place.

Things don't change that much. The poor, in particular, get pushed from pillar to post; the authorities don't pay much attention to their well-being. And although people

don't have to travel to pay tax, other financial transactions with the government, such as receiving benefits which are absolutely essential, can involve the fear and experience of financial sanctions if you're late, or miss an appointment, resulting in crippling debt, hunger, and eviction.

But Jesus came for the poor and the harried – he was born among them. And that's why all over the country ordinary Christians, with a bit of training, are helping people in money advice centres with their financial situation – helping them get debts re-scheduled and, so far as possible, find their way through the benefits maze.

Out in the night – that's what many people fear; having to sleep out in the night in the winter. Over 500 people died on our streets last year. But all over the country churches are opening up their premises in the winter months, to provide somewhere warm and safe, a hot meal, and a bit of company. They do it remembering that Christ and his family had no proper place to lay their heads – only a stable, He came to be with people in that terrible situation.

Now, I'm not suggesting for a moment that only Christians and churches reach out to other people. Many of the kind of people I've mentioned will have had heroic help from workers in Citizens Advice Bureaux, for example – people of good will of all faiths and none. But I do think it's worth reflecting on how the Christmas story shows us the kind of God we're worshipping tonight, and the sort of consequences which flow from that. And when we take time to ponder that, the Gospel at work in our lives can be like a fertile seed, always throwing up new fruits – responses to his love which are relevant in our

particular age. These responses, in the lives of God's people, are part of the Good News we celebrate at Christmas, and very often they're somewhere under the radar of the media, whose reflex response to the words 'Church' or 'Christianity' is to speak about 'decline', as though Christians were about to die out, and have no impact worth speaking of on society.

But these initiatives I've mentioned – and I could have talked of others, of course, such as the huge network of foodbanks inspired by Christian faith – they don't speak of despair and death. Rather, they speak of life and vision – a hope that's being constantly renewed in God's love, and is finding new ways of expressing itself in ways appropriate to the twenty-first century. They speak of people who've let themselves be embraced by the Spirit of God, to the point where life has become an adventure for them in the company of Jesus. It could be that this is a moment for us all to let ourselves be caught up in that vision!

Jesus, of course came for everybody – for the forgiveness of our sins, to bring us the hope of heaven – but we should never forget that it was to those out in the night, and to the poor, the harried, and those with nowhere to lay their heads, that he first showed himself. When we remember it this in a way that goes beyond the merely sentimental, then our great Gospel reading can speak not only of the coming of Christ, but also of his continuing life and work in us, in all who open their hearts to him, when it says that

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it!

