

**A Sermon preached by Fr Justin White at  
St Mary Magdalen, Oxford on  
The Feast of the Nativity of our Lord 2006**

I sincerely hope that you do not have a *happy* Christmas.

There, I've said it now.

Is this curmudgeonly 'bah, humbug' on my part?

No. These are sentiments spoken in love – with your best interests at heart. For, if this season is merely happy, it runs the very grave risk of becoming no more than the ersatz Xmas which is being played-out out there with more saccharine and fake bonhomie than even Disney can muster.

Whereas, *we* know that the real story goes like this:

It begins with a dubious teenage pregnancy and the scandalous whiff of infidelity. Already, we are at the very least in the realms of Eastenders rather than Disney. We proceed with an arduous journey, heartless slamming of doors in the face of need, and a filthy makeshift delivery room in a shed round the back of a pub. Then come some seriously sinister Christmas presents from some shady sorcerers. (Take the myrrh, for example; a commodity in the funeral business. It's rather like receiving a Christmas card through the post, opening it, and discovering that it contains your own death certificate.) And then our scene ends with the streets running with the blood of the slaughtered newborn, accompanied by the sound of mothers wailing, and a terrified flight into exile in the desert.

That is the true Greatest Story ever Told; in every sense, not fun family entertainment; in every sense, not 'Happy'.

So, in what possible sense is this 'Good News'?!

Well, I think those shepherds understood it first ... and don't for a moment think that that little romantic pastoral vignette in our story is a happy moment of relief in the midst of horror. If that's what you think, I suggest you've never had to look after sheep.

Certain wretched shepherds spending yet another ghastly night in the chilly hills of Syria. When, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

'Sore afraid'. Allow me to translate: They were given a severe case of the willies, of the screaming 'ab-dabs – which is to say about as frightened as men get.

For this 'glory of the Lord' is none other than the uncreated splendour that surrounds the One God. We call it 'light' because we have no other word, but it is far older than the creation of light or the making of matter. It exists from eternity. From it the worlds emerged, into it they will dissolve. This light is the radiating bliss of God's utter being. It is the flame of God's joy at His own existence.

This sight sends our shepherds trotting down the hill, gibbering with terror, down into the grubby little village called Bethlehem, into a clumsy little stable, and onto their knees – to see what it is they saw.

And what do they see? Well, St John has just told us: They saw the One by whom all things were made; without whom was not any thing made that was made. In that unprepossessing, grubby, fear-fuelled setting, the shepherds had reached the core of the cosmos; they were gazing on the innermost heart of the universe. God made flesh. God all-bounteous, all-creative ... is incarnate, and a native of the very world He made.

And that is why this is our Good News. Only a God who comes as a beast to live among us beasts in all our beastliness is any good for us.

And that is why I want to say, away with the tinsel and the fairy lights and the shrink-wrapped little baby Jesus. Not because I'm some curmudgeonly kill-joy but because these things don't begin to do justice to the enormity of this thing that has come to pass.

Away with 'Away in a manger ... the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes'. I don't think so – not if he's like any other baby I've ever met. But, more importantly, if no crying he made, he's no good for me for this is my flesh and my blood in all its frailty which has been taken by God.

That is why this is Good News.

*I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.* The joy that these gibbering terrified shepherds experienced is not 'happiness'.

I don't know how you're feeling. You may be shaking with a mysterious delight, or you may be feeling dreadful, or vaguely sentimental, or indifferent. I don't mean to be callous, but I don't care. The great joy of Christmas isn't a feeling within us; it's a fact outside ourselves. This joy is so huge that, like the shepherds, it ought to leave us sore afraid.

Something has come to pass, and can never be undone. God has broken the heavens apart and poured Himself out on the earth. A word has been spoken; a helpless and fragile word, spoken in a Bethlehem stable. A word of unexpected interruption, a word that establishes for good the difference between the God we would like and the God who actually comes.

So I stick to my guns: I hope you do not have a Happy Christmas. Instead, I hope you have a Christmas of great, great Joy!