25 December 2019: Choral Eucharist
Christmas Day
Isa 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1–14
The Very Revd Professor Martyn Percy, The Dean
‘The Accommodation of God’

As the story goes, some junior school kids had been rehearsing their Christmas nativity play for many weeks. Finally, they were ready for the big Christmas Eve show. The school assembly hall was filled – stuffed with parents capturing every second on their mobiles – and the play was going perfectly to plan. Then the script deviated. Christmas is a time for tradition and improvisation, after all. And so at the scene where the innkeeper tells Joseph and Mary there is no room. Mary turned to Joseph and said, “I told you to make those reservations!”

Unexpected journeys and the lack of space – and things being in places where you don’t expect them – are familiar themes in the Christmas story. That’s why I quite like this cautionary seasonal tale recounted in the letters page of a local newspaper, who writes as follows:

“Sir, Recently I had a little too much ‘fun’ at our office Christmas party. And possibly too much to drink. Knowing the police were on special alert, I did what they say you should do – so I took a cab home, which was lucky because they are not easy to get hold of after most Christmas office parties. Anyway, I managed to grab an eight-seater, so took all my friends with me as well. This proved to be a very wise decision, because after only a few blocks there was indeed a police checkpoint and all drivers were being stopped, and they were breathalysing everyone. But our taxi, being a taxi, was waved right on through. So it was a good decision to take the cab. I made sure all my friends got home safely first. Anyway, it was easier than I thought, and quite fun driving a cab. It’s really just like any other car. But now I have this huge eight-seater taxi sitting in my garage filling up the space and I don’t know what to do with it, or how to return it back to its owner. Can any readers advise me?”
Jokes about the lack of accommodation for the Holy family are a ten a penny. But this is interesting when you think that Christmas is, in a real sense, a time that hinges on accommodation. There is the stretching of rooms for family members and friends who visit. Stretched belts that have to accommodate too much food. Stretched relationships where, in a season of goodwill, people make a real effort to accommodate their nearest and dearest that they don’t always get on with. Budgets are stretched to accommodate necessities and generosities. Christmas is the season of accommodation – stretching and embracing space, relationships, families and friendships, and ourselves.

A careful reading of Luke’s gospel – and by this I mean the original Greek, not the English translations – reveals that the crucial thing about the accommodation arrangements in Bethlehem was that there was basically not any suitable room of size or purpose fit for a labour. Even if Joseph had booked ahead, I suppose you could say that there had been a mix-up with booking.com; and instead of a quiet, large family en-suite room with an annexe for parking the donkey, he’d been allocated a single room with a single bed, and no en-suite. Mary is about the give birth. The donkey needs a kip. This isn’t going to work.

So, the phrase “no room” may not mean we have not got a room, or any room. It more probably means that the kind of suitable room a woman needs for childbirth is not free. This would have required a space of size and reasonable ritual purity, and where people – especially midwives – could watch, wait, help, sleep and eat. A large house might have had such a room.

So the space where the animals are kept – which would also be part of the house – is the only alternative. Good news for the donkey; less so for Mary and Joseph. But it is Christmas, and not everyone gets what they want. The people answering the door to the strange unmarried couple about to become a family just cannot accommodate Mary. And no-one would permit anything holy in the space where no room was made for these sacred things.

There is an irony here. Accommodation is what the incarnation is all about. God is accommodating us, beginning with Mary giving birth to Jesus. Indeed, Mary’s accommodation of God is what sets up this whole train of events. It is only with her “yes” to the angel that God can begin.

So yes, Christmas is all about transport, accommodation, unexpected provision and surprising gifts. And God making his home amongst us – but in a place that is not fit for folk to live in. It is a place of muck and filth. Yet oddly, by this birth in a stable, even the dirt hallowed by it being found to be warm and resourceful. And of course Jesus,
throughout his ministry, will spend his time hunting for followers in such places, and loving and curing all those who are from such places – places of marginality, outsiders, good-for-nothings. He is the giving gift to them.

God works with unpromising material from the very start – marginal, disposable people. So a girl, pregnant before she is married, is simply God’s cunning wisdom-salvation plan.

God’s grace works through imperfection. The bigger the flaw, within reason, the more outrageous the outpouring of grace. God making a home amongst us, on our side of the fence, means that we can know God has prepared a place for us to be home too.

Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us. God starts this work of accommodating us by finding that we can barely accommodate two strangers – one of whom is about to give birth. And yet even in that most unsuitable accommodation – the stable – God has enough: the tiny foothold of an infant to draw us into God’s heart and love. God’s power is made perfect in weakness.

So, to my favourite Christmas Cracker joke for 2019: “Why might Donald Trump have been boycotting midnight mass this year? Because of the rumours of Fake Pews”. Well, it’s better than most jokes you’ll get today. But there is no Fake News today; only Good News. God never, ever shuns you.

That’s what Christmas means. God with you, today. Forever. God will never forsake you. Ever. So yes, Christmas is all about transport, accommodation, unexpected provision and surprising gifts. God travels to us in Jesus. God opens the gates of heaven and the heavenly home to us through that humble Bethlehem-crib which accommodates Jesus. The great gift of Jesus says: “come and dwell with me for eternity – in the heart and house of God, there is always space for you.” There is room at God’s inn for us all.

So we can pray this poignant Christmas prayer, because it is not only a miracle that God came to us – but that he came to such a broken world, and started his work of salvation with shepherds on hillsides, an out-of sorts pub landlord with no suitable lodging, and loads of other people who mattered to no-one, and who had no inkling that God might be interested in them, let alone love them. But God loves us all enough to make his home in the midst of us, so bids us gather round the manger. Our prayer goes like this:

Blessed art thou, O Christmas Christ, that thy cradle was so low that shepherds, poorest and simplest of earthly folk, could yet kneel beside it and look level-eyed into the face of God.

May God bless you this Christmastide, and in the year to come. Amen.