25 December 2018: Choral Eucharist
Christmas Day
The Rt Revd Dr Steven Croft, Bishop of Oxford
‘Do not be afraid’

There is a refrain which runs through Luke’s story of the birth of Jesus: “Do not be afraid!” How we need to hear it.

The angel speaks with Zechariah: “Do not be afraid”. The angel visits Mary: “Do not be afraid”. The angel stands before the shepherds: “Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people”.

The angels’ song is still the same, if we can hear it: “O frightened, weary, fragmented world, contrary and confused: do not be afraid”.

The Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari has become a worldwide bestselling author in recent years. His first book, Sapiens, is a panoramic history of our species. His second, Homo Deus, looks at the potential futures for humankind in an era of artificial intelligence and human enhancement. His third, 21 problems for the 21st Century is an uneven look at the great challenges of the age.

Harari is no friend to religion. He might be surprised to be mentioned in a Bishop’s Christmas sermon. One of his great insights is the importance of story to human achievement and endeavour.

Harari ponders what makes our species unique. It is, he says, the ability to collaborate in very large numbers. What makes human collaboration possible?

Harari believes we owe it all to the to the ability to tell stories, to give an account of the world and ourselves. These stories in turn give birth to fictions and conventions and these make possible our common life. Cities, universities and schools are the product of stories. So is a ten-pound note. So are our banks and commercial institutions. So is this Cathedral. Everything is rooted in our ability to tell each other stories.
Some of those stories are about individuals or families. Some of us will tell them to each other in our gatherings at Christmas. Some are about nations. In these islands at present we are wrestling with the story we want to tell about ourselves in relation to Europe. Some would say we have quite literally lost the plot.

But some are universal stories. These stories aim to weave a narrative from beginning to end which gives meaning to the whole of our lives and the whole life of the universe. Today we are telling part of the greatest and deepest of these universal stories. It’s a story which begins before the Big Bang and creation and before time itself. It’s a story which arcs through the aeons of prehistory and the ages of history and as far into our future hope as the mind can see. It’s a story which begins in darkness and chaos and which ends with a new heaven and a new earth and the world set right and God wiping every tear from our eye.

It is the most beautiful story in the world. It’s a story about the whole of humankind: it’s depths are pondered by wise men and women down the ages and yet loved and understood by children. It is a story of love: of God’s love for the world; of God’s love for each person in creation.

In one way you and I are at the centre of the story for it is a story which gives a unique part to every life. In one sense it is our story. But in another important sense this is his story, God’s story.

We are telling only part of that story today, but it is the beautiful and important centrepiece, the keystone of the arch. All of creation looks forward to this moment. All of creation looks back to this moment. This is the centre of God’s time.

A child is born in one place and time: born in poverty and captivity. Born to a young girl in uneasy ways: worshipped by angels, greeted by shepherds, searched for by wise men, pursued by a tyrant.

His name is Jesus, Saviour. He is called Christ, the King. We dare to believe that God Almighty, maker of the stars becomes a person. The Word becomes flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.

God speaks in and through and about this child and God’s first word is “Do not be afraid”. Our world is asking deep questions of life. Year by year they become sharper and more desperate. What will happen to our planet? How will we live with new technology? Where do we rediscover our identity and our place in the world? How can we ensure that life is
fair and good for all? What does it mean to be more than consumers, to be human, to live our lives with purpose and meaning and agency and joy?

Our world asks deep questions but cannot find deep answers. Fears multiply. For some there is a deep unease, an unnamed anxiety which shapes them; for others a sense of not being able to cope. A fearful and confused population is more easily divided and exploited by those who seek power. The world stands at a moment of great vulnerability in our economics, in our politics and for our environment. It is this world which needs to hear again the message of the angels: “Do not be afraid”.

Do not be afraid to look more closely at this story, this presentation of the universe which you may have forgotten or neglected dismissed. Dare to believe that God comes to be with us in vulnerability and love to mend and heal the earth and sets a pattern for that healing.

Do not be afraid of spiritual reality for God is real and loves you and our lives need spiritual food and meaning for we are human. Dare to seek God’s help in every circumstance of life. Admit your need of grace and forgiveness and strength and walk humbly and gently on the earth. Have the courage to reach out to others, to your neighbours and friends, in kindness and in love.

Do not be afraid to confront the mistrust and fear which poisons our public life and model a different way. Dare to leave your seat on the sidelines and strive to make a difference in the world. Be prepared for failure and for criticism when you try. In the end as Theodore Roosevelt says, it is not the critic who counts but the man or woman in the dust and sweat and blood of the arena who is prepared to strive and, daring greatly, to try, to fail and start again.

Above all, take your courage from this story. It is the most beautiful story in the world and it is true and to be trusted. Do not allow your life to be shaped by anxiety and fear. Take courage from Mary, who says yes to God; from Joseph who trusts God’s purposes; from the shepherds who come to wonder in the stable; from the magi who will begin a dangerous journey to follow their vision of a better world. Take your courage from God who comes in vulnerability and love to bring a different vision of heaven changing earth, from the child who comes to draw us home and sends you to build his kingdom. His name is Jesus Christ.

“Do not be afraid: for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day, in the city of David, a Saviour who is the Messiah, the Lord.”