



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

OXFORD

**5 January 2020: Said Matins with Hymns**

**The Second Sunday of Christmas**

**Jeremiah 31:15–17, 2 Corinthians 1:3–12**

**Canon Professor Carol Harrison, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity**

**‘A Barbed Wire Nativity’**

My favourite Christmas Carol was written by one of the first Christian hymn writers, the fourth century poet, Prudentius. His poem frames Christmas with eternity, and gives us a sense of the weighty mysteries which are being played out in Jesus’ birth.

Of the Father’s love begotten, ere the worlds began to be,  
He is Alpha and Omega, He the source, the ending He,  
Of the things that are, that have been,  
And that future years shall see, evermore and evermore!

Prudentius reminds us that the baby born in the stable was God the Son, the eternally begotten Word of God, of one substance with the Father, who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is eternally God the Trinity – Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end; the Creator and source of all things and the goal and end of all things; the providential orderer of all that is, all that has been and all that is to come, until the end of the ages.

This is more than we can begin to apprehend, of course. We readily enter into the very human drama of the birth of a baby and feel love and affection for him and rejoice at his arrival. But other elements of the drama which are much more disconcerting: what about the star, the angel’s song, the kings who will arrive tomorrow to pay this baby homage?

For this is a moment when we not only feel tenderness and love for a new-born baby, but also awe and reverence – unbearable awe that God should descend, empty himself, and limit his eternal, limitless being to the confines of temporal, mortal human flesh. But above all I’d like to suggest this morning that it is a moment of hope and of consolation amidst what can seem almost unimaginable and unbearable suffering: hope, that everything that happens, happens according to God’s providence; consolation, that suffering is not an end but a beginning.

Earlier this week we remembered the Naming and Circumcision of our Lord. The fact that the new-born Jesus was circumcised according to Jewish Law, and given the name Jesus, or Joshua (the one who saves) is like the star, the angel's song, the coming of the kings; it is an example of the way in which every event in his life must be seen in the context of eternity: Jesus, the Son of God, born of Mary, is identified as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, as the longed-for Messiah, the deliverer, the one who will save God's people, Israel.

The Carol which the choir sometimes sing at Nine Lessons and Carols – Bethlehem Down - captures this well. It begins with Mary's loving musings on her son, born to be king:

When He is King we will give Him the King's gifts,  
myrrh for its sweetness and gold for a crown,  
Beautiful robes' said the young girl to Joseph,  
Fair with her first-born on Bethelam Down.

But the Carol then continues to draw out the true reality of her son's Kingship:

When he is King they will clothe Him in grave-sheets,  
Myrrh for embalming, and wood for a crown,  
He that lies now in the white arms of Mary  
Sleeping so lightly on Bethelam Down.

We are reminded that the little Lamb, who invites all our protectiveness, will become the Lamb who is slain. The love which the tiny child inspires is caught up into eternity, in response God's love: a love which is defined by self-giving, and ultimately self-emptying; a love which gives life and will die to restore and renew life.

When I was in Milan for a conference just before Christmas, I was struck by a Christmas crib in a museum in the Church of St Ambrose. It had been made in 1944 by Italian soldiers - prisoners in the German concentration camp at Wietendorf. They had used whatever lay to hand: their tools were a boy scout knife, a small pair of scissors, a door hinge as a hammer, a lamp fueled by their daily margarine ration. The figures were formed from barbed wire and pallet wood, and clothed with what the soldiers had in their regulation boxes or rucksacks – souvenirs from loved ones, pieces of green jacket cloth, striped cotton fabric from their toilet bags, shreds of pyjamas, strips of the chaplain's cassock. The frayed material of a horse bag became the wool of a sheep. An

Italian soldier and a German guard join the shepherds and kings around the crib. The backdrop is not a stable but the compound and watch tower of the camp.

For me, this made everything fall into place: the baby lying in the manger is indeed the one born to die; the one who will endure unimaginable suffering; whose life will be cut short; who will face the worst of human evil and overcome it. The prisoners in the concentration camp surely saw themselves in this helpless baby – but with hope and consolation.

It is this hope in God's providence, even amidst the worst of suffering that our two readings this morning set before us. 'A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children'. Ramah, just outside Jerusalem, served as a transit camp for Judeans being deported to Babylon, and Rachel is lamenting the deportation of her children. But Jeremiah prophecies: 'Thus says the Lord: Keep your voice from weeping and your eyes from tears....there is hope for the future...your children shall come back to their own country'. Paul, too, admits to being afflicted, to being 'so utterly, unbearably crushed that' he 'despaired of life itself'. But he tells the Corinthians that he realized that his affliction was part of God's providence; it that made him rely on God, not on himself; that through his suffering came consolation – and that like Christ's suffering, this is a consolation that can be shared with others: we are able to console others with the consolation with which we ourselves are consoled by God.

This, I think, is the true message of the incarnation, of Christ's birth as a baby: the baby who lies in the manger is Alpha and Omega; the beginning and the end; and in God's providence, he came not to enable us to avoid suffering, but to give us hope and consolation in the midst of our suffering; to show that with suffering comes consolation; that suffering is not an end but a beginning, and that our suffering enables us to share hope and consolation with others.

And so let us look ahead to tomorrow, when the Kings will arrive to worship the new born King and offer him their gifts. Another hymn captures the hope and consolation that the birth of this king will bring and, I think, echoes what those prisoners in Wietzenberg must have felt as they used their humble belongings to create a nativity:

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness  
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim,  
With God of obedience and incense of lowliness,  
Kneel and adore him, the Lord is his name.

These, though we bring them in trembling and fearfulness,  
he will accept for the name that is dear;  
mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,  
trust for our trembling and hope for our fear.

Amen.