

Christmas sermon

A talk given at the Courage Christmas Special – a special service with carols, readings, mime and Roy’s talk – for friends and members of the Courage Discipleship Group, 5 December 2003.

Christmas is a time for get-togethers. Family reunions, the office party ... and of course, carol services. Sometimes such seasonal social occasions bring together rather unexpected people.

I sense there are one or two among us tonight, for instance, who are a little surprised this Christmas to find themselves in a meeting surrounded by predominantly gay men. Was that a sigh of relief, or disappointment, I heard during the offering just now, when you discovered that it was actually money the guy sitting next to you was placing on the offertory plate, and not his telephone number?

There are others here I suspect who are equally discomfited at the prospect of sitting in a church full of those notoriously homophobic evangelical Christians. Were you perhaps half-expecting to be confronted tonight by a zealous Nigerian bishop offering to exorcise the demon of homosexuality out of you?

Here we are then – gay and straight, religious and not-so-religious – Christmas does have this strange way of bringing together rather unexpected people.

It was like that, in fact, at the very first Christmas of all. Just think for a moment about those guests that found themselves invited to it: a bunch of peasant shepherds on the one hand and delegation of Persian scientists on the other. Two more disparate groups of people it’s hard to imagine. They can’t have had much in common to fuel the small talk while Joseph was passing round the crisps and sherry, can they?

What on earth had brought them there? How was it that their very different paths had converged at that moment of time 2000 years ago, in Bethlehem?

The answer is that, diverse as the shepherds and the wise men were as people, they were both looking for something.

In the shepherds’ case, it was largely a political quest. Like quite a few people in the developing world today, the shepherds belonged to a defensive culture that felt it was being bullied by the forces of a global empire. Western power had invaded their country, led by President Augustus Caesar. It had a lot of military and economic muscle and was mercilessly pushing up the tax bill for the local working classes. These shepherds hadn’t quite resorted to suicide bombings yet, but you can be sure some of the young men among them were not that far off doing so. They had a glimmer of hope, you see, which kept them militant. As in *The Matrix* movie, an oracle had years before issued a prophecy that one day a special person would arrive – ‘the Christ’ – who was destined to bring in a new era of peace and justice. Not everybody believed it of course – but the shepherds did. Which is why, when something decidedly odd happened that night, they’d decided to follow it up. Angels, they said it was. Bright shining messengers from another world, telling them the ancient prophecy was about to be fulfilled – the ‘Christ’ they were waiting for had been born!

What was it they saw, do you think? An hallucination after one too many in the Bethlehem Arms the evening before? Or were these angels actually extra-terrestrial aliens visiting in a flying saucer? There’s plenty of room for scepticism when people tell stories about supernatural encounters. But it is just possible, isn’t it, that as *The Matrix* rather suggests, there is a deeper level of existence underlying the fabric of this material world which we call ‘reality’, and that just occasionally that deeper reality breaks through to communicate with us?

That was the Shepherds' interpretation of what had happened anyway. And somewhat similar things do still happen today, you know. Oh, I'm not saying you bump into people who've had visions of angels very often. But a surprising number of people do admit to some kind of supernatural experience in their lives.

I remember a man I met in hospital some years ago. He was only about 50, but he'd had a massive heart attack. The doctors said that technically he had actually died during it. But he claimed he'd never really lost consciousness. He talked about seeing a bright white light and hearing voices. Again, plenty of room for scepticism – but he was never the same again after that near-death experience. He really felt he had met God.

You have every right to be cynical about stories like that, of course. Anecdotal evidence can't prove anything. I bet those shepherds encountered their share of cynicism down in Bethlehem that night when they shared their excitement about the angels with their neighbours. But – be sure of this – such things are reported with surprising regularity.

In fact, maybe something a little bit like it has even happened to you? Have you never had a moment in your life when you felt the presence of God? Not as vivid as the shepherd's encounter, no doubt, but a 'sign' nevertheless. A sign that, if you followed it up this Christmas, might lead you to Bethlehem.

Where, as I say, you would meet some unexpected people!

Persian scientists – what on earth were they doing there? After all, this was Israel; Mary and Joseph were orthodox Jews. These so-called wise-men were downright pagans who didn't know one end of the Bible from the other. Normally they wouldn't be seen dead in Judea. What had brought Persians to Bethlehem?

Well, as I said earlier, they too were looking for something. This time, however, it wasn't an angel that had put them on to it – but a star. Not a particularly bright or unusual star, by all accounts. If it had been really conspicuous everyone would have been talking about it, wouldn't they? No, this seems to have been the kind of celestial event only diligent scientific observation could detect. But detect it they had; and since astronomy and astrology were pretty much the same thing in those days, they thought it must mean something. So, like the shepherds, they followed it up. It took quite a while to do so, mind you – a journey of many hundreds of miles. But eventually their star brought them to Bethlehem too.

It was a crazy thing to do, of course: to set off halfway across the world on the strength of the ancient equivalent of one of Russell Grant's horoscopes! But once again, similar things do happen today.

In fact, if I'm honest something rather similar happened to me. I was a scientist once, you know – a hard-headed rationalist if ever there was one. No use showing me visions of angels – I'd have just put it all down to indigestion and gone on reading my Stephen Hawking. But like the wise-men, I was looking for something: answers to the big, ultimate questions. Questions like 'why are we here?'

To my irritation, I discovered science didn't really have a satisfactory reply to such big questions. It was quite good at describing *how* we got here; it talked very authoritatively about Big Bangs, and Evolution. But these theories were absolutely useless when it came to explaining *why*?

The best they could do was attribute it all to Chance. We were a vast cosmic accident – the product of the chaotic motion of particles that neither knew nor cared about our existence. Yet the more I understood of the exquisite symmetry and complexity of those elementary particles that composed our universe, the larger that question-mark seemed to become in my mind. I simply couldn't believe it was all a momentous accident; it didn't feel like an accident – more importantly *I* didn't feel like an accident. I had a sense of purpose and destiny in my heart – and science had no categories that could interpret that sense of purpose to me, which did not end up simply explaining it away as some kind of sick joke played on me by my cerebral neurones.

No, there had to be something more. A deep intuition convinced me of that. And the light of that intuition was my 'star' – my inexplicable scientific anomaly. Like those Persian astronomers, I followed it up. It was a long journey – it took me through many books and several years – but eventually it led me, like them, to Bethlehem.

Maybe you have unanswered questions too? Maybe you, like me, find it hard to live a meaningful life without a satisfying explanation for the mystery of existence. Maybe, you like the shepherds and the wise-men – are looking for something? What do you call it? Justice? Freedom? Hope? Peace? Truth? Love?

Take my advice: pursue that elusive something! Don't let cynicism or mental laziness put you off its track. Pursue it, I say, and I suspect you will find this Christmas your path is converging with that of many others on a similar quest. Black and white, yellow and brown, male and female, young and old, gay and straight – they are all there you know. Some have followed angels and some a star; some have come from religious families, others are former pagans; some come because they feel God has intervened in their lives in a supernatural way, others because they are asking big questions which only he can answer. But from whatever background they come, by whatever route and following whatever star ... their paths converge at Bethlehem.

There they discover that the *something* they are seeking is not in fact a **something** at all – but **someone** – his name is **Jesus**.