

Sermon preached by Canon Philip Banks First Sunday after Christmas 2019

“There were shepherds keeping watch in the fields.... And the Angel said to them “this will be the sign: you will find a babe wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger”.[Luke 2]

There were Shepherds. There is a beautiful painting, ‘*The Adoration of the Shepherds*’, by George de la Tour, which hangs in the great museum of The Louvre, in Paris. It shows the Nativity Scene: a very dark stable, with Mary, Joseph and the shepherds gazing on the sleeping child Jesus, wrapped in linen and lying on straw. It occurred to me that it would be great to have a powerpoint slide on a giant screen of the painting showing for you, but you’ll just have to imagine the painting! [Readers of the sermon can see it [here](#).]

The de la Tour is a very dark painting with lots of shadows behind the figures. Joseph holds a lighted candle (a lamb feeds on the straw in the shadows). Joseph’s frail little light reveals the rapt attention of those shepherds, their fascination with the new-born baby of whom the angel spoke.

As you see the thoughtful intense way in which they are gazing at the Christ-child, I think the artist is inviting us to think that they are all wondering who the child will become as he grows? What life has in store for him? Perhaps they asking themselves ‘Will there be a world in which the child can grow and flourish?’

As you think on that, it is not much of a step to wonder the same thing for our own children or grandchildren, and for children in all parts of our world. What kind of world are we bringing them in to? What dangers? What amazing opportunities?

De la Tour’s picture is striking because it suggests so poignantly all those very natural human concerns that we might share in our own age, with the group gathered around the infant Jesus as they look upon the beauty and vulnerability of a tiny child.

But the painting is especially striking because there is a difference. This child, the child of the painting, seems to emit his own, extra, light – not the light of Joseph’s candle, but a beautiful, searching, spiritual light which shows up the faces of Mary and Joseph and the weather-beaten shepherds. Somehow this ordinary child casts a light into the darkness which shows the *ordinary* mother and *ordinary* husband and *ordinary* rough old shepherds as extraordinary, beautiful, spiritual beings – children of God, reflecting God’s image. The child’s light shows them in God’s light – that they are, and that we are, beloved in God’s eyes, God’s children, vulnerable too, in need of love.

Everybody loves a baby. Babies remind us of how very precious human life really is. And we know that babies can bring out the best in people. You have only to look at how gently and tenderly people treat a new born.

The thing is of course is that as the baby grows up he or she seems to become less adorable, less infinitely precious.

The adorable baby becomes one of the group of young people who hangs around on street corners, gathering with friends in a public place for safety - but sometimes unnerving others - and we do not always find it easy to see that *young* person as the infinitely precious and infinitely adorable person that they once were.

Or what of the adorable baby that ends up as a young adult imprisoned in a detention centre because they seeking asylum. You see we can soon forget how infinitely adorable, and infinitely precious in God's sight, that a child once was.

The Christmas story is a story of a baby - a baby who is most certainly infinitely precious and infinitely adorable to the shepherds and to Mary and Joseph - and for Christians the world over rightly precious, because he is God come to share our human life.

But you see the real point of the Christmas story, and what De La Tour's painting helps tell us, is not that the baby is infinitely precious, but that we are infinitely precious.

For if Jesus - who is God - becomes a member of the human family, then we all have God as a member of our family -- and that means that the whole human family (which is now God's adopted family) is infinitely precious.

I am precious, you are precious, because I am a member of God's family - that family which is so infinitely precious to God that Jesus dies to show how much he loves us.

If I am infinitely precious and you are then every other human being is equally infinitely precious - and that is not just about the people we like or agree with – but I'm afraid is also true of the person who will cut me up in the car to get the only parking space left at the Aldi supermarket. It is also true of the man in a distant country's 'call centre' who (because of his awful English or the delay on the line) will drive me bonkers trying to extort money or sell me something. It is true of those who shock us deeply because they may have perpetrated terrible crimes against children.

And because we now know, through the birth of Christ, that every person is precious in God's eyes, we have to decide what we will do in the face of Climate Change; or the increasing numbers who find themselves homeless because of government policy; or the increase in those who can't afford heating or are now relying on charitable Foodbanks.

Some voices like to say that religion and politics shouldn't mix. How wrong that is you need to tell them: the bible is full of people of faith who have challenged and spoken truth to power. Jesus, on whom our Christian faith is built, died because he spoke truth to power. And we are called to do the same now because the babe lying in the manger calls us to look at the world in a new way; to refuse to go along with those who in politics, or in conversation, would deny the utter preciousness of every child of God.

As you look with the shepherds on the Christ-child, what is your prayer? What do you seek for yourself, your loved-ones, for the world we share and its peoples? What fears do you bring in prayer? What hopes do you bring in prayer?

My prayer is that this knowledge of divine love might throw light on our lives – that we might be enlightened to live for what is good and wholesome and true. I pray for a deeper sense of wonder and awe and worship for myself and in all of our lives. I pray that those in government might have the capacity to see the preciousness of every person.

May the light of Christ at Christmas,
and power of God's love surround you,
God's strength be with you,
and the peace of Christ be in your heart and home,
this Christmastide, this coming year
and always.
Amen.

© Philip Banks 2019



The Adoration of the Shepherds
a 1644 oil on canvas painting
by Georges de La Tour
now in the Louvre Museum
Picture from www.wikipedia.org