

Christmas Midnight Mass (2018)

Through the four Sundays of Advent we have prepared for this celebration by first reflecting on the story of David. From among his descendants the Messiah was to come. And then we thought about the places most associated with David: Jerusalem, the fortress capital of David's United Kingdom of Israel and Judah; and its holy mountain, Zion, the place of the Temple and God's presence among his people; and finally, Bethlehem, the place of David's birth and the place where Messiah would be born.

If you read David's story in the Books of the Chronicles, written quite late in the Bible's chronology, you will hear of a perfect David who walked close to God and whose biography was not tainted by sin or scandal. That was the figure David became in popular belief. That's the David most of you imagine. The real story of David is written in the Books of Samuel and Kings, and that shows a flawed figure, whose sins were great. A brilliant and successful soldier of Israel who went over to the other side and fought for the Philistines; who, as he sought the crown of Israel, watched as his rivals were killed, but always had clean hands; and who gave his son, Solomon, a hit list, people to take out, after the manner of a *mafioso* Godfather. At the heart of his power, his lust caused his life to fall apart in a spectacular fashion.

The Bible is unmatched in showing us the dark side of humanity. There are no flawless heroes among patriarchs, matriarchs, kings or prophets. And yet God's love for his seriously wayward people is constant. The repeated descriptions of the Lord-God are '*emet*' and '*chesed*'. God is ever faithful to his word, and constant in his love.

The culmination of God's faithfulness and love is the entry into the world of God's Son, the Messiah; the perfect expression of God's relationship with human kind, whom God made in the image and likeness of God. Now God comes among us in the image and likeness of mankind.

Today Jerusalem and Bethlehem are places of tension and deep sadness. The streets of the old city have security forces at each corner; well armed and frighteningly young. National Service starts before University and continues through adult life. The modern city is prosperous and inviting, but with an awareness that at any moment violence could break out. The nation is on a constant war footing.

Bethlehem and the occupied territories of the West Bank are now separated from Israel by a huge, ugly wall which scars the countryside but which is seen by the government as a fair price to pay for the protection it gives from suicide bombers. The check-points are ways of causing frustration, delay and distress to Palestinians. It is an unsubtle form of oppression, saying loudly 'We do not want you here'.

The world into which Jesus was born was also a place of oppression. King Herod, known to history as 'the Great' was increasingly paranoid as he grew older and no one

in his court was safe from his murderous intent should he have a suspicion of a suspicion of a plot against him. He had an efficient spy network to reveal any threat, real or imagined. His lavish building programme was at the cost of weighty taxes, which, as always, fell disproportionately on the poor.

After Herod's death there was a revolt in the Galilee and Roman troops from Syria quashed it with typical Roman ruthless rigour. The town of Sephoris, just two miles from Nazareth, joined the rebellion. It was flattened and its population sold into slavery.

In the meantime, in Matthew's telling of the story, Jesus and his family are refugees, economic migrants and homeless before returning and establishing their home in Nazareth, where Joseph might have found employment in rebuilding shattered Sephoris.

The world into which Jesus was born had similarities with the Land of Israel / Palestine today, Jesus came to live in solidarity with the poor, with a special affection for, and ministry to, the marginalised and oppressed. For he is the embodiment of '*emet*' and '*chesed*'. Today, we who think of ourselves as members of his body – his agents in the world today, must live as he lived and minister as he ministered, with constant faithfulness and unfailing love.