A Christmas Invitation

The party invitations have rather dropped off this year, haven’t they, our 2nd Covid Christmas. But the most important invitation of all is still valid – no lock down could ever cancel it – it’s represented there in front of the altar in the crib scene, God’s invitation sent in the form of a tiny baby to all humankind to join God’s family. It’s an invitation, not a dictat - we have a choice about whether or not to accept as did those who first received it 2,000 years ago.

The characters in the Christmas story are portrayed in the panels hanging on our pillars – the angelic messengers who first announced the invitation; Caesar Augustus, the Dictator who with a wave of his hand sent people moving all around the Empire; King Herod, the petty local tyrant who cared only for self-preservation; the Magi, the clever men who could read the skies and predict Jesus’s birth and wanted to be the first to greet him; and the shepherds, the poorest of the labouring classes – and of course the Holy Family, Joseph and Mary and the baby.

Who would have those roles in our world today? The Emperor Augustus of course never heard of Jesus, but his successors, far from accepting the invitation, opposed and persecuted the Christian Church for three centuries. Perhaps our equivalents today would be the leaders of the great powers – or perhaps they would be the Heads of the huge tech corporations, who have as much influence, often hidden and unsuspected, over our lives as Augustus did over Joseph and Mary’s. And Herod? The Burmese Generals perhaps, or certain Middle Eastern potentates – we’re not short of candidates. The wise men? Scientists perhaps, of whom we see and hear so much due to the current pandemic – and the Shepherds? Those struggling to survive and feed their families on the minimum wage, or zero hours contracts.

All of these are invited with equal loving kindness to join God’s family. All are equal in God’s sight, whatever their role in the hierarchy of the Society in which they’re placed. And the question for us this morning is not how do THEY respond to God’s gracious invitation – it’s how do WE respond.

We’re hard-wired as humans, I think, to want to be part of a family, to be with people who care for us and who will look out for us – I suppose that’s the instinct for self-preservation kicking in. And at Christmas more than any other time we want to be with our immediate families – but where does that leave people with no family, or whose family life was grim or cruel, as we’ve been reminded recently can sometimes be the case, or where death has intervened and there’s one - or more – empty chairs at the festive table?

Where does that leave them? It leaves them invited, perhaps more pressingly than the rest of us, to be part of God’s family. You may have noticed I left out the angelic messengers in my casting of the modern day Christmas story. That’s because I’d like to suggest that we are called to take on that role – as well as responding ourselves to the invitation, I think we’re called to be the messengers who pass it on.

When Jesus grew up he didn’t just teach about God’s invitation, he lived it out in the treatment of all those he met, he lived it and he died for it. We’re called to live it wherever we are, whatever we do, by treating all those we meet as members of our family – whether we look like them or not, whether we think like them or not, all those we meet are invited by our Lord and Saviour to be part of his family, and therefore part of ours.

This invitation, God’s act of extraordinary grace and mercy towards humanity, which still resounds down the centuries with undiminished force, changed everything. So I end with a short poem about that crucial moment.

BC :AD by U. A. Fanthorpe.

This was the moment when Before

Turned into After, and the future’s

Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.

This was the moment when nothing

Happened. Only dull peace

Sprawled boringly over the earth.

This was the moment when even energetic Romans

Could find nothing better to do

Than counting heads in remote provinces.

And this was the moment

When a few farm workers and three

Members of an obscure Persian sect

Walked haphazard by starlight straight into the Kingdom of Heaven.