

*'An exceedingly early Christmas Sermon,' preached by the Revd Dr Michael Piret, Dean of Divinity, in Magdalen College Chapel, Oxford, on Sunday 29 November 2015.*

When I started preparing this sermon, my last as Dean of Divinity, I thought it might be an idea to have a look at the *first* sermon I preached at Magdalen, twenty-one years and seven weeks ago today. I opened a big plastic box of old sermons I've kept, and found it. What struck me first was a predictable feeling of embarrassment, to see the sorts of clever quips I thought would be engaging at the time. The other thing that struck me, was how I took up the theme of the sermon. The theme was Christian Unity, and the way I spoke now seems quite dated: my sermon assumed that everyone present was a professing Christian, and that our main challenge was for those of conflicting Christian views to get along with each other.

Two decades later, many would say that the main challenge for the Church is just staying alive. A poll taken last year showed that not even one in five people in the UK – only 17 per cent – say they are Church of England or Anglican. The percentage of those who regularly go to church will be much lower. Another poll two years earlier said the average Anglican in the UK is aged 61. Former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey has famously said the Church of England is 'one generation away from extinction.' To be fair, Lord Carey is not exactly known for his optimistic take on the future. Or the present. But however you look at those numbers, they are not encouraging.

Despite all that, speaking as a pastor, not a statistician, I believe there is cause to be deeply optimistic about the future of the Church, whatever form that future takes. My reason for this is grounded not in the Church as an institution: God save us and prevent us from putting our faith in that. It is founded in the Christian story itself, and what it means. Indeed, in the *Christmas* story. The Christmas story holds within it a truth which human beings will always need to hear. It presupposes that our existence has meaning. It says we are here not as the result of random co-incidence, but because of a Someone. A Someone whose attitude towards us is benevolent and loving. A Someone who wants to be known to us, who has reached out to us: a Someone whose truth has been uttered in a particular human life, in a specific place and time. As it says in the prologue to John's Gospel, the ultimate Christmas reading: that Truth, that Meaning, that Word, was made flesh and dwelt among us. The story of Christ's life is humble, in many ways ordinary. It shows us what selfless love is. It goes down the road of what we call tragedy; and that tragedy opens out into life in all its fullness. Life beyond hope, on the other side of despair. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (John's prologue again, John's Gospel, chapter 1, verse 5).

We may feel we live in dark times. Even if we probably don't know what genuinely dark times are like, they seem dark to us. Some of you may be going through a time of *inner* darkness: for some that can be the darkest time of all. In the course of ordinary life, every one of us will at some point come up against overwhelming loss or grief. Darkness caused by bereavement, illness, foolish mistakes, disappointments or failure, in some cases sheer loneliness - or depression. The greatest privilege of my ministry here has been the opportunity to be a companion, pastor and friend, to students and others who have found themselves in various kinds of strange, dark places. In these cases, whether the person is religious or not, the human spirit longs above all else for someone to tell them that there is light on the other side of darkness. Then, just possibly, they can begin to hope that maybe there is light on the other side of *their* darkness: that it's worth going on, worth letting time pass, worth it even to let time pass in suffering like the shadow of death – because, just maybe, it will give way to life. Over and over, I have seen the astonishing effect that kind of

perseverance and courage can have: when people have been saved by the strange, unprovable hope, that the awful mess they were in, was part of a larger whole that had life in it, life on the other side of it. And that hope turned out to be right: they got their lives back – they could live again – find joy in the light. And a good number of them are among the happiest, most active and productive, generous people I know.

Every time that happens, the Gospel of Christ finds new expression. The good news of Christmas comes alive again in someone's own personal story. And that's regardless of whether they 'name the name' or profess the faith. They have lived in, they have been living out, the mystery of Jesus Christ. Out of darkness, light. Through the Cross, Resurrection and new life. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it.

As long as the Church and her people keep telling that story, proclaiming that good news to be true, there will be no extinction (I'll bet you on it). Not as long as there are ears to hear and hearts to receive it. Because it speaks directly to human need and it communicates life-giving truth.

Now just a bit of tinsel – but I promise to stay on message. Next year, it'll be seventy years since the release of the timeless film, *It's a Wonderful Life*, which many people rightly think of as the definitive Christmas movie. Its legendary director Frank Capra said it was his favourite among all the films he had ever directed. The equally legendary James Stewart said it was *his* favourite, of all the films he'd ever acted in. If you've never seen it, I prescribe it to you as necessary viewing during the Christmas vacation, while I am still Dean of Divinity. It will turn up in the TV listings more than once, and if you miss it there, you're under orders to find another way of watching it. Frank Capra said he made the film 'to combat a modern trend toward atheism,' and although it isn't conventionally religious in any sense, you can see what he meant. Because it's about light shining in darkness, a light which the darkness can never finally overcome. It's about the wonder and goodness of ordinary love, decency and compassion towards those in need. It's about the terrible power of evil; but the greater power of love, over every last worst thing that evil has to throw at it. *It's a Wonderful Life* was not, on first release, the universally acclaimed success it later became. This was partly because some viewers found it too dark, too close to despair. It's been called a 'terrifying' film, 'asphyxiating.' It goes deep into darkness with the main character, George Bailey, who's on the brink of taking his own life as the movie begins. In this story, the Someone who reaches out to him with benevolence takes the form of an altogether unlikely, crochety, bumbling angel named Clarence – but if you don't know that already, you need to see the story for yourself.

The good news turns up in all sorts of places, of course not just in religious places. The good news that we see in Christ is not contained *inside* the Christian religion. It is a reality far greater than religion. It's woven into the fabric of life, it's a reality to which our religion at its very best leads and directs people. Out of darkness, light. Through the Cross, Resurrection and new life.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it.

In a world like ours, so wracked with pain, senseless violence and suffering, to celebrate and try to live out that faith, is the most life-giving thing any of us can do.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness will never overcome it.

Those are tidings of comfort and joy. My prayer for us all, for each of you – whether you're religious, not religious, or anything in between – is that this good news and its joy may be seen again and again, over the whole of your life and beyond.

Which is to say, God bless you all. And when it comes, though it's still a long way off – when it comes, have a very Happy Christmas.