ROWAN WILLIAMS

CHOOSE LIFE

Christmas and Easter Sermons in Canterbury Cathedral

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Archbishop
Rowan Williams

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EASTER SERMONS

Preface

Easter and Christmas are the defining points of the year for all Christians. Easter marks the event that changes the entire landscape of how we talk about, and think about, and relate to both God and humanity; Christmas celebrates that mysterious and unique coming-together of God and humanity which makes Easter itself possible. The whole of Christian doctrine and devotion unfolds from these two celebrations, from the resurrection of Jesus and the birth of the eternal Word of God in flesh and blood.

So these are festivals that pose a challenge to any preacher. We are familiar with the stories and the doctrines; but how can you begin either to speak adequately of events on which the whole history of humankind turns, or to speak freshly of events that have exercised the best gifts of mind and imagination among Christians for two millennia? And because you're likely on these occasions to be preaching to a somewhat wider audience than committed Christians alone, how do you begin to make the connections between

these world-altering mysteries and the questions and crises of contemporary public life and human experience?

These sermons are in part an attempt to build a few bridges between these different worlds of understanding. But they are not meant as current affairs commentary with a bit of religious colouring. I have tried, with whatever uneven degree of success, never to lose sight of the fact that what we celebrate in our festivals is the action of the living God in and through the particular humanity of Jesus of Nazareth as recorded in Scripture and reflected in the creeds. To be personal: I have found throughout my ministry that the shape of Christian doctrine as set out in these creeds is an inexhaustible resource in making sense of the complexities of human experience, of politics and economics and the often tormented psychology of men and women. 'Orthodoxy' is not therefore another word for mechanical traditionalism. It means for me and countless others a wellspring of insight and delight. I can only pray that these meditations may at least help to prompt a suspicion that the story which takes shape around the birth and resurrection of Jesus may after all be the story

upon which all the diversity of human exploration and journeying converges.

Rowan Williams
Lambeth Palace, All Saints, 2012

A note on the Lectionary

With two exceptions the Archbishop's sermons gathered here were all given at the main morning celebration of the Eucharist at Christmas or Easter, at which, following the Church of England's *Common Worship* lectionary, the scriptural readings were:

Christmas	**Easter**
Isaiah 52.7–10	*Isaiah* 65.17–end
Psalm 98	*or Acts* 10.34–43
Hebrews 1.1–12	*Psalm* 118.1–2, 14–24
John 1.1–14	*1 Corinthians* 15.19–26
	or Acts 10.34–43
	John 20.1–18
	(The reading from Acts must be used as either the first or second reading.)

Christmas Sermons

The Kingdom of the Simple

Christmas Day broadcast 2002

> The low vault was full of lamps and the air close and still. Silver bells announced the coming of the three bearded, vested monks, who like the kings of old now prostrated themselves before the altar. So the long liturgy began.
>
> Helena knew little Greek and her thoughts were not in the words nor anywhere near the immediate scene. She forgot everything except the swaddled child long ago and those three royal sages who had come from so far to adore him.
>
> 'This is my day', she thought, 'and these are my kind.'

Helena is speaking some seventeen hundred years ago; she is the Empress Helena, mother of Constantine the Great in Evelyn Waugh's 1950 novel named for her. Late in life, she has discovered the new faith of Christianity, and sets

off to the Holy Land to anchor her new belief in the sheer physical facts of history and geography – because what is different about Christianity is that it identifies the mystery of God with a set of prosaic happenings in a specific place. God is just there for all, not locked up in technical language or mystical speculation, but, as Helena has said earlier in the novel, the answer to a child's questions: When? Where? How do you know?

But Helena, longing for this simple vision, is still caught up in the bitter, devious world of politics. Her son the Emperor, confused and anxious at his own extraordinary success in subduing the Roman World, gets more and more embroiled in palace intrigue, in espionage and assassinations, in black magic, in the hall of mirrors that is the daily life of the powerful. Helena, brisk and honest though she is, can't completely avoid getting caught up in this too; feeling trapped in Constantine's world of plots and fantastic visions of a new world order, she sets off for Jerusalem to find the remains of the cross of Jesus.

So here she is in church at Bethlehem, tired and puzzled. And suddenly, as the priests process

solemnly to begin the service, the story of the three wise men makes sense to her of some of what she's experienced. These so-called wise men were her sort of people, the people she was used to: clever, devious, complicated, nervous; the late arrivals on the scene.

> 'Like me', she said to them, 'you were late in coming. The shepherds were here long before; even the cattle. They had joined the chorus of angels before you were on your way …
>
> 'How laboriously you came, taking sights and calculating, where the shepherds had run barefoot! How odd you looked on the road, attended by what outlandish liveries, laden with such preposterous gifts!
>
> 'You came at length to the final stage of your pilgrimage and the great star stood still above you. What did you do? You stopped to call on King Herod. Deadly exchange of compliments in which began that unended war of mobs and magistrates against the innocent!'

Even on their way to Christ, the wise men create the typical havoc that complicated people create; telling Herod about the Christ child, they provoke the massacre of the children in Bethlehem. It's as if, in Helena's eyes, the wise, the devious and resourceful can't help making the most immense mistakes of all. The strategists, who know all the possible ramifications of politics, miss the huge and obvious things and create yet more havoc and suffering. After all, centuries after Helena, here we still are, tangled in the same net, knowing more and more, stepping deeper and deeper into tragedy. Communications are more effective than ever in human history; analysis of national and international situations becomes ever more subtle; intelligence and surveillance provide more and more material. We have endless theoretical perspectives on human behaviour, individual and collective. And still the innocent are killed.

Yet – here is the miracle – the three wise men are welcome. You might expect that a faith which begins in such blinding simplicities, the child, the cattle, the barefoot shepherds, would have no place for the wise men in their massive foolishness. But, thinks Helena …

> 'You came and were not turned away.
> You too found room before the manger.
> Your gifts were not needed, but they
> were accepted and put carefully by, for
> they were brought with love. In that new
> order of charity that had just come to life,
> there was room for you too.'

Coming to the Christ child isn't always simple. It just is the case that people come by roundabout routes, with complex histories, sin and muddle and false perceptions and wrong starts. It's no good saying to them, 'You must become simple and wholehearted', as if this could be done just by wishing it. The real question is, 'Can you take all your complicated history with you on a journey towards the manger? Can you at least refuse to settle down in the hall of mirrors, and go on asking where truth really lies? Can you stop hanging on to the complex and the devious for their own sake, as a theatre for your skills, and recognize where the map of the heavens points?'

> 'You are my especial patrons,' said
> Helena, 'and patrons of all late-comers,
> of all who have a tedious journey to make
> to the truth, of all who are confused

> with knowledge and speculation, of all who through politeness make themselves partners in guilt, of all who stand in danger by reason of their talents.
>
> 'Dear cousins, pray for me,' said Helena, 'and for my poor overloaded son. May he, too, before the end find kneeling space in the straw. Pray for the great, lest they perish utterly.'

So: don't deny the tangle and the talents, the varied web of what has made you who you are. Every step is part of the journey; on this journey, even the false starts are part of the journey, experience that moves you on towards truth. It won't do to think of Christianity as a faith that demands of you an embarrassed pretence of a simplicity that has no connection with reality; isn't this what so often leads people not to take Christianity seriously? As though you had to leave the full range of human experience outside the door (the stable door), while the innocent alone entered without challenge?

Helena's answer is worth pondering. Bring what has made you who you are and bring it, neither in

pride nor in embarrassment, but in order to offer it as a gift. It's possible to say to God, 'Use what my experience and my mistakes and false starts have made me in order to let your transfiguring love show through.' It's true that the Christmas event is precisely the answer to the simplest of human questions, to the 'When? Where? How do you know?' demands of the child. It's true that those who are least well defended by sophistication and self-reflection get there first. They have fewer deceptions to shed, fewer ways of holding God at arm's length, while so many of us have a lifetime's expertise in this. From them we learn where to look; we know how much we long for that sheer presence and accessibility of God, the bare fact of the child in the manger, the life in Galilee, the mystery laid open. But we come as we are; room is made for us, healing is promised for us, even usefulness given to us if we are ready to make an offering of what W. H. Auden called our crooked heart. Evelyn Waugh knew something about this himself – like so many writers, he knew what it was for imagination to twist round on itself like a snake, he knew about the gaps that open between work and life, how a work finished and beautiful in its own terms emerges out of a human background of failure

and confusion. He had no illusions about himself, recognizing the melancholy, anger and hypersensitivity that shadowed his life. His Helena is praying for her literary creator; the writing is a prayer for absolution.

In the straw of the stable, the humble and the complicated are able to kneel together. If God is there in the simplicity of the baby in the straw, the answer to a child's question, that means he is there in naked simplicity for the sophisticated and troubled as well, those who have had long and tortuous journeys, cold comings, to the stable. Yes, we are told to become like children, faced with the invitation to believe and trust in the God of Bethlehem. But that is not the same as saying, as we all too often do, 'Christmas is a time for the children', meaning that it has nothing to say to grown-ups, who indulge the pretty fantasy for a short while but stay firmly outside the stable door.

Helena knows better. The childlike response of longing and delight can come even from a heart that has grown old and tired; and when such a response arises, let no-one think that they are too compromised, too entangled to be welcome.