

Christmas 2015

The Bishop of Chelmsford's Sermon

There was no room at the inn. That's one of the first things small children learn about the Christmas story. Many learn very little else. Nevertheless, it stands as a powerful sign of what we do when God comes knocking. We draw the curtains. Check the locks. Put the chain across the door. Set the alarm. Pull up the drawbridge. Make excuses. Say we're busy. Pretend we're out. Ask him to go somewhere else. Peek through the net curtains to check he's gone somewhere else.

We don't want God in the cinema. Any number of adverts can sell us dreams of wealth and beauty and the products that will deliver them, but please don't disturb our aspirations with something that tells us we may have to wait, or make do with what we've got, and that happiness might actually be found in giving. Especially not at Christmas.

And we don't want God in politics. Well, not too much. Uncomfortable reminders that phrases like 'collateral damage' mean we are killing children, and that we need a plan for when the bombing stops, and if we had one, and didn't keep changing our minds about which side we are supporting, we may not have needed so many bombs in the first place, are not welcome. We want the church to bless the bombs not ask why we need to drop them.

And we don't want God in our homes. Fairy lights, tinsel, Christmas trees, yuletide logs, reindeers whose red noses glow in the dark, and Father Christmas, yes they are very welcome, but if this disquieting story of a teenage mum and a backstreet birth, a poll-tax summons and a tyrant king, a bloody genocide and a refugee family fleeing for their lives, must intrude on our Christmas celebrations, then let it be that cosy, neutral, Disneyland version that sits on the mantelpiece and bathed in beatific light won't harm anyone.

And we don't want God in our hearts. Why? Because it is too full of the worship of other gods. The gods of plenty and excess whose festivals of Black Friday and Cyber Monday, Panic Tuesday and re-mortgage the house Wednesday we faithfully observe. The gods of nation and tribe whose borders we keep secure. The gods of vengeance and fear who tell us it is in eliminating our enemies that we find peace.

Oh, poor sinners that we are on this Christmas morning. Never more in need of this fantastic story of love, never more distant from its firm and particular embrace. Brothers and sisters, hear him knocking. Yes, I know we have put so much insulation around our lives that it is sometimes hard to hear him; I know that we think life is easier or even better without God, but the message of Christmas is that God's word is made flesh and born among us. He comes knocking at your door. If you open it he will come in and eat with you. Your life won't be the same again. It will be put in the right order. You will be given a new heart and a new vision. You will see the world differently. The good things will be given back to you, and will be more lovely. The desire of what you know will do you harm will fade away. You will see God everywhere because you have found and received him somewhere, here in *this* child in *this* manger on *this* Christmas day.

We will have invited him in; and the song we sung in childhood will have made us a child of God –

Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask thee to stay
Close by me for ever, and love me, I pray.

+Stephen Chelmsford

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