

HUMBLLED BY GREATNESS

PREACHER : The Very Rev'd Adrian Newman, Dean

Sunday, December 24th 2006
Eucharist of Christmas Night
11.30pm
Rochester Cathedral

Ever since my early teens I have cherished a dream to visit Israel. To breathe the air that Christ breathed. To see the countryside that was his constant companion throughout his short life. To visit the places where this remarkable life was lived out. To sit on a hillside overlooking Lake Galilee and become lost in silent wonder.

I am not, strangely enough, so bothered about the places that tourists flock to see. The garden tomb, Golgotha, the Via Dolorosa. As is so often the way, these places get overlaid with the glitter of religion, ornate churches and souvenir sales.

But there is one place I should like to go. It is the church of the Holy Nativity in Bethlehem, a church erected on the exact spot where tradition has it that Jesus was born.

Now of course tradition may be wrong, but I could live with that. It would be an extraordinary place to visit, this night of all nights, when all around the world people go time travelling in their imaginations back to that stable. Summoned afresh by the angels to that lonely and unlikely birthplace, stepping inside, eyes alight with wonder, to see the child born to bear the weight of human history.

There is one particular feature of this church which sums up for me all that is of the utmost importance about Christianity: the door. Many, many years ago this door was large, large enough for someone to ride through on horseback right into the church. Later it was made smaller. A rider would have to dismount from their horse but they were still able to walk into the church upright. Head held high. Then, for two very practical reasons the door was made smaller. In times of war the church had to be defended. In times of peace they wanted to keep animals out of the sanctuary. So, for these two very practical reasons, the door was made small. Very small.

Now, if you want to get into the Church of the Nativity you must stoop and bow your head low to enter the place where Jesus was born.

There is a simple message here for us this holy night, and it is about humility. Only those prepared to bend the knee and bow the head will discover Christ. There is no place in the Christian life for pride, arrogance or self-importance. The door to discover Christ is narrow and low and only those prepared to humble themselves can enter it.

Towards the end of his life, the great scientist, Isaac Newton said this. "I do not know what I may appear to the world, but to myself I seem to have been only a boy playing on the sea shore and diverting myself in now and then finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.

The story is told of some tourists who one day visited the home of Ludwig Van Beethoven. A young woman among them sat down at the great composer's piano and began to play the Moonlight Sonata. After she had finished she turned to the old caretaker and said. "I presume a great many musicians visit this place every year? "Yes" he replied. "Paderewski was here last year". "And did he play on Beethoven's piano" she asked. "No" the old man replied. "He said he wasn't worthy".

I think all of us sense that there is an appropriate reaction to finding ourselves in the presence of beauty, greatness or holiness. It is to be awed by beauty, humbled by greatness and stilled by holiness.

Buildings like the one we are in tonight are good for the soul. They give you a rich sense of perspective. Yes, they humble you, dwarf you, put you in your place. But they also connect you to something special. Something different. Something other. Something that lifts you and renews you.

In my experience, this is what knowing God is like. It connects you, centres you, earths you, in a relationship that both humbles and exalts you at the same time. There's an old proverb. A mountain shames a molehill until both are humbled by the stars. But, as anyone who looks up on a clear night knows, to be humbled by the stars is not to be brought low but is to be lifted up. That's what God can do for each and every one of us.

Like Isaac Newton's boy kicking at the pebbles on the beach, dwarfed by the expanse of uncharted ocean, we need a healthy sense of our own unworthiness but also a keen understanding of God's supreme and uncharted greatness.

A month from now, unless something entirely unforeseen occurs, I am set to fulfil that long-held ambition and visit the Holy Land. As I walk through the door of the church of the Nativity I will be connected back to this service.

But this holy night, in this holy place, as we approach the manger step by step, let us re-connect with the faith that rises to meet us in our hearts, bend our knees and bow our heads, stoop low to enter humbly through the narrow doorway to God, and come face to face with Christ who is waiting there for us.