

Midnight Mass, 2018 St. Lawrence

'Once in Royal David's city, stood a lowly cattle shed'.

Well, it's probably true that there was one in Jerusalem, somewhere.

Unfortunately though, what's probably *not* true is that Jesus was born in it. The whole idea of the baby born in the stable because there was no room in the inn – it's yet another of those things which when you look closely at what the Bible actually says doesn't really have much going for it.

I won't bore you with the details right now, but what St. Luke's Gospel actually says is something like this: because there was no room in the family guestroom, Joseph's relatives decided to host him and Mary in the main family living room instead. The main family living room, in those days and that place, was where the animals slept as well – hence there being a manger (the animal's feeding place), and hence in later days the whole confusion about it being a stable instead.

So Jesus was born, it seems, in a proper house, at the heart of a family. In warmth and safety and bustle. His birth, in this respect at any rate, was not actually strange at all. It was ordinary.

And the reason I tell you this is because it's good to remember that in lots of ways, Jesus was ordinary. For all he was amazing and astonishing, there was much else about him which didn't stand out. He did not have greatness written all over him.

One preacher from the last century put it like this:

Here is a man who was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another village. He worked in a carpenter shop until He was thirty. Then for three years He was an itinerant preacher.

He never owned a home. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family. He never went to college. He never put His foot inside a big city. He never traveled two hundred miles from the place He was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness. He had no credentials but Himself...

While still a young man, the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied Him. He was turned over to His enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed upon a cross between two thieves. While He was dying His executioners gambled for the only piece of property He had on earth – His coat. When He was dead, He was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

So far, so ordinary – but then the preacher takes this sharp turn:

Nineteen long centuries have come and gone, and today He is a centerpiece of the human race and leader of the column of progress.

I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that ever marched, all the navies that were ever built; all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of man upon this earth as powerfully as has that one solitary life.

Think of that. A life in many ways ordinary, a life really deliberate in its smallness and humility – and yet a life about which one can say without insanity: all the armies that ever marched, all the navies ever built, all the parliaments that ever sat and all the kings that ever reigned, have not affected the life of man on earth as that one solitary life.

And why is that? It's not just because Jesus came to be the centre of a new religion, now more than two billion strong and touching every corner of the earth. It's not just that his life had consequences which have shaped all of world history since. If it was just that, we might claim, perhaps, that Mohammad or even Marx was in the same league. It would be an interesting debate to have: which life has had the greatest history shaping consequences. One for dinner tomorrow perhaps.

But the Christian claim is different. It is not just that Jesus' life shaped history; it is that his life touches ours. Touches yours, right now. His life, we say, is the key to your life, the key to every human life that ever was and ever will be. It's because of his life, that your life can be unlocked – taken out of whatever sadness and misery and smallness it has got shut into. The great door swings open, into sunlight and fresh air and freedom: that's where your life, we dare to say, is headed because of *this* life. Because of Jesus: his birth, his life, his death and what came after his death – his victory over all that is dark and dead. This one solitary life touches you. It touches the darkness and death in you, and it sets you free. You, whoever you are – however sad, however broken, however defeated, however whatever – *you* are on the way to joy, and beauty, and freedom. *You* are on the way to glory. *You* have had your future opened up, by this one solitary life. That's why we sing. That's why we rejoice.

So this Christmas, amidst all the chaos, all the busyness, all the wonderful exhaustion of it all – make some space, at the heart of it, to be aware of his life, touching yours. Let it be here at the altar rail, in the bread and wine or in blessing. Let him unlock you, and trust Him to guide you into the joy that waits for you. Then you will have had a truly holy night, and a blessed Christmas. Amen.

Peter Waddell