

St Mary-le-Bow, Cheapside, London EC2V 6AU

**The Parish Christmas Carol Service**

*The Revd George Bush, Rector*

Thursday 19th December 2019

A friend of mine is a judge and not so long ago he texted me to ask my middle name. I texted back and asked for his – thinking he had had a rather good lunch. But it transpired that a person with all of my names, and in the same order, was up before him in a few weeks' time. Instead of merely noting the rather unusual coincidence of names, I felt irrationally guilty; although I knew that I had done nothing that would cause me to be arraigned in a Crown Court; yet I sensed that I had been found out, caught with my thumb in the honey jar – all my pretence at virtue and respectability finally exposed. I deserve a moment in the dock. I ought to say that my namesake's alleged crimes, when they emerged, are well beyond even my imagining. There's the usual prize of a pound of Brussels sprouts to the person who guesses most nearly. Kindly avoid googling until the next hymn.

The sense of human personality exposed is the leitmotif of our age – it's not so much what you do, but the folly of texting or tweeting about it. Who is to say whether this feeds the distorted relationships of our political culture or vice versa. But we aren't content with the social relationship structures of modernity - although there are encouraging moments; the Muslim woman who defended a Jewish family from a seeming Christian on the tube. The father who refused to allow his son's senseless murder to be the cause of deeper retribution. Or the Palestinian family living close to an Israeli settlement and near to land of which they were once the undisputed owners who have put up a sign that, although they still protest, 'We refuse to be enemies'. Or Speaker Bercow who told MPs to treat each other 'as opponents not enemies'.

We live with visceral political emotion and yet our culture insists we must not discriminate and the effort is wearing. I can recall the days – a little wistfully - when, at a General Election people used to say 'their policies are all the same – what's the choice'. Now the polarisation is such that we wonder what sort of person might someone be to vote in this or that way?

'Discriminate' is one of those English words which manages to function with two nigh opposite meanings. It can be thought that it is a good thing to be a 'discriminating' person; someone who can judge the quality of things – one member of the congregation here certainly thought it of me. Arriving early in Bow Wine Vaults he asked the manager if he thought the rector would enjoy a bottle of Gavi and was slightly surprised by the reply, 'the rector will drink anything'. But 'discrimination' is generally more likely to be an assault than a compliment. But it might be thought that the opportunities to treat everyone the same are decreasing; I heard it said that people attest to enriched and more vital relationships discovered through the choice available on the internet than the proximity of living close by people as neighbours. Perhaps that takes us to the heart of the present dilemma – we have lost patience with the human talent for rubbing along with those who are just to hand and owning their concerns as ours and our fortunes as theirs.

Historically the neighbourhoods of the City – and this one round here still works pretty well – were defined by the churches and their parish boundaries. I was struck that a website, [‘department 56’](#) offers a new and rather impressively detailed model of this church in ceramic; or, as the blurb says ‘meticulously hand crafted and intricately hand-painted porcelain’. It’s a foot long if you are thinking of a late Christmas gift idea and at a whopping \$180 they seem to be taking a leaf out of the contractors on our recent tower restoration project. Oh – and it lights up!

Christian communities – churches – can still lay claim to be among the most diverse mixes of people in a specific spot, even though the Church as institution has rarely grappled with diversity with especial ease or flair. A ‘church’ as understood in the New Testament and after the resurrection of Jesus from the dead was never a building, always a gathering of persons; indeed what was most radical about the church was that it was the only place where free persons and slaves met together with a measure of dignity.

For Christians human dignity is not a function of the practical or the political it is rooted in the doctrine that Christmas denotes and celebrates; the Incarnation of the Word, who existed as God and became human as Jesus. At Christmas the concentration is especially upon the circumstances of Jesus’ birth. The family into which Jesus was born may have been farmers who had been made landless by burdensome Roman and Jewish religious taxation – Joseph may have had to find another trade. Birth and infancy were perilous in pre-medical days and much conspired to make this appearance of God upon the earth as likely to be unnoticed or disregarded. This is itself the describer of the astonishing humility of God ‘though he was in the form of God...he emptied himself being born in human likeness.’

But we must be careful lest anyone should imagine that this appearance of God is pure condescension to a lower state. Far from it, the Incarnation is not some remarkable intervention from a God exasperated by human waywardness; some kind of last chance saloon. Better for us to imagine that the Incarnation was inevitable; and even if the world had not been mired in sin and disease, God would not have been able to stop himself from sharing himself with the people to whom he had already given everything.

If this be true then human dignity is not so foreign to divine life; as the priest says when mixing water with wine in the chalice at the Eucharist, ‘by the mystery of this water and this wine may we share Christ’s divinity as he came to share our humanity’. That he came in poverty and vulnerability is perhaps a further hint at authenticity.

Those who celebrate the Christ Child are bound then to defend human image and to talk of it with the reverence we reserve for the things of God. No one is less human than us for not sharing our outlook or our background; the Christ Child does not belong to Christians but to all people and in every place – he can be ignored or adored without peril or reproach. The cry goes up in our day, ‘We want our faith in humanity restored!’; happily, and at Christmas, that is exactly God’s policy.