

Midnight Communion Christmas 2019

Isaiah 52:7-10

John 1:1-14

“Vietnamese boat people,” we used to call them. Desperate migrants escaping conflict in Vietnam made their perilous way to Britain and sought to make a new home. One little boy called Ho found himself in an inner city school. He was mute. He went on a school trip for a week’s stay at the amazing Nethercott farm that Michael and Clare Morpurgo ran, and still do: a place for city kids to experience farm life and work. The little boy said not a word. One night, as everyone gathered by the fire for stories, Michael realised the boy had disappeared. Imagine the worry, searching the farm for him in the dark. He found him in the stable. Looking quietly in he saw the hitherto mute boy talking fluently in Vietnamese and then English with their horse, Hebe. The story of his struggle, the bombing, his family’s death on the boat, his escape and English adoption poured out, fluent and warm, without an ounce of self-pity. Michael was spellbound, not wanting to interrupt or shatter the moment. The boy was mute by choice. It was, of course, a natural way of navigating the unbelievable upheaval of the journey and powerlessness of the cultural shift. The boy’s special educational need was actually profound silent strength. And silence meant exceptional listening, working out who and what could be trusted. The horse with its patient presence, its own mute attentiveness, its combination of size and gentleness, was clearly one whom the boy could trust. At the end of the week, on the way home, the little boy spoke to the headteacher in excellent gentle English, saying what a good time he had had.

Michael Morpurgo will be remembered for his wonderful weaving of stories, but perhaps his greatest gift has been, with his truly magnificent wife Clare, this hosting of children from deprived inner city schools at that farm. You’ll be please to know their first ever group, including that little boy, was from Castle Vale and, soon after, others went from Druid’s Heath. After disappointment in both military and teaching careers, Michael was writing stories by the time that boy visited, and tried them out in those evenings surrounded by city kids by the fire. Seeing the Vietnamese boy talking, *communing*, with the horse, planted a seed which grew into, yes, Warhorse. That brilliant little linguist gave Michael a gift which he has passed on to us. His writing career did not start smoothly or easily, even Warhorse taking time to be accepted by a publisher, but it was the work that really established his voice and helped his story telling take flight, giving us Adolphus Tips and Private Peaceful and a hundred other emotionally intelligent, moving works. Ho, the little boy, was given voice by Michael and Clare’s humanity. In a way, Ho helped Michael find his voice.

Countless Christmas tales and carols and artworks involve the animals that stand silently in the background of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth. We presume a donkey got the pregnant Mary to Bethlehem. We imagine the animals ruminating, puzzled by the presence in their feeding trough. It can be cheesy, but we should not dismiss it as goey

anthropomorphism. For just as the boy found a trustworthy companion in the old horse, making us reflect on why he found it hard to trust people, so the artists and storytellers and carollers imagine animals worshipping their creator not to fantasise, but to ask, how is your praise? What is our human response, we superior beings, we sophisticated people of imagination? The poetic evocation of animals, far from sentimental, is to loosen the grip of cynicism and transactional relationship. It is an ironic exposition of St John's words: He was in the world; the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. " When in scripture animals are evoked and trees and mountains burst into song it is in order to challenge us to consider our response to the thought that God is present in the grit and crisis, the boredom and excitement, the tiredness, eagerness, sorrow and love of our ordinary lives. The Christ child does not speak. Indeed he grows and lives thirty years listening before his voice rings out in life-giving storytelling. His silence meets the world's need, appraises and absorbs it so when he does speak it is with meaning, humility, power, wisdom and compassion.

Isaiah gives bright voice to messengers bringing good news, imagining breathless runners proclaiming that the Lord has come to save a beleaguered, lonely people. When all seemed lost, their voice gives others voice, provoking joyful singing among the ruins. The Lord has bared his holy arm, conjuring up, at first, the strong arm of a warrior showing his muscles. Now we see this promise fulfilled, though, we see instead that it is the bare arm of a helpless child who has come to listen and to speak only to deepen our sympathies and nurture our emotional intelligence; to help us find our best voice.

Here on Christmas night in another stable, we can see the salvation God offers. Here we can hear God's call to listen to each other, even to the animals. We are called to look around and see who needs to be listened to; who needs to find their voice? In the listening, we may find our voice nuanced and tuned, releasing gifts we don't know we have.

Don't you wonder what that boy, Ho, went on to do? What a gift a listening linguist might be to this sad, argumentative, lonely looking country today. What worrying neediness we think we see in migrants, without seeing our own neediness distorted into post-colonial nostalgia. How drab at best, poisonous at worst our national response has been recently to people whose first language is not English. Don't you wonder what gifts we are missing? What wisdom are we squandering? What gifts might little people like him release in us? We may never know.

Christmas Morning 2019

Psalm 98

Luke 20:1-20

Our one really good stained glass window shows Gabriel telling Mary she is pregnant. His deep blue wings, in harmony with her blue robes, like so many medieval paintings, suggests a rich holiness about them. Today, most experience annunciation with a little blue line of a pregnancy test. What a shudder of emotion that little blue line provokes. The enormity of it. The disruption. Whether it is longed for or feared, or both, it is seismic. Its absence being the profoundest disappointment, or the most exhilarating relief reveals its power no less.

And, it is a miracle.

Some don't countenance the appearance of an angel, or the talk of Jesus being divine and human. I respect that, but am always a little puzzled how strident we can be, as a matter of perspective. For the scale of the miracle of conception, announced by that little blue line is so vast. So talk of an angel telling Mary that God who is responsible for everything existing conceives with her a baby with a unique calling is only a very tiny bit more of a miracle. It's in the same category, size-wise, really. Puzzling over the angel distracts somewhat from the breath-taking disruption that is about to take place:

Her relationship with Joseph having to re-configure; the unstoppable of pregnancy, no matter where the government orders you to go for the census; the unforeseen terror of becoming refugees as the child provokes such jealousy in the king; all that on top of the ordinary benevolent crisis of becoming a parent.

So here is the second massive miracle: Mary's "yes". Around her were others, some of whom helped her find that yes, like aunt, Elizabeth whose "yes" gave us John the Baptist. She and Mary formed a little self-help group for women experiencing untimely pregnancy. Joseph, deeply hurt by the conception was, after heart searching and dreaming of a life together, was caught up in Mary's yes and added his own exceptionally gracious "yes", choosing to trust, taking protective responsibility. Then there was the little, perhaps reluctant "yes" of whoever lent the animal space for the odd couple. There's the unknowing, patient yes of ruminating animals, finding their feeding trough occupied. Then we heard the "yes" of people whose lives weren't generally associated with the word "glory," but whose working class shepherd-watchfulness equipped them, far better than well-fed sleeping priests in the city, to hear that God had come to disrupt humankind with compassion. The shepherds' "yes" is energetic and contagious, and all the more moving because they are not the usual religious suspects.

In the psalm, we heard, all nature joins in an eager, joyful “yes” to God: the sea’s roar, the hills’ singing, floods’ clapping, because God comes to reveal the truth about things, just by being here, by living in such a way as to judge how we carry ourselves and how our decisions bear upon each other. We reflected last night on how this poetry of unknowing nature giving active praise is to stimulate our own praise, reminding us wittily that we terribly superior, sophisticated beings, so clever and imaginative really ought to be first to say “Yes” to our creator.

The odd nativity scene contains almost cinematic, tender detail. Those swaddling bands of cloth, mentioned twice, show a new parent’s effort and assertion of normality in a ridiculously uncomfortable place. They are an emblem of the power and resilience of maternity in a context of the primeval disruption of birth on the one hand and the bureaucratic disruption of over assertive government on the other.

All this gracious humanity: strangers with bleak jobs expressing delight in the birth; some of the poorest paid, rich in praise, telling others to rejoice; Joseph and Mary’s sheer effort. This is against the backdrop of the emperor objectifying millions of people. To him, Joseph is a number, too old to go to war, but as a small artisan business owner one that can generate tax to pay for the army occupying his country. Jesus is a number with a red mark next to it, because he is a boy who in maybe twelve or thirteen years could be sent to fight when the Emperor decides to invade somewhere else. The tender details defy the objectification and commodification of people.

Moreover, they draw us in. For we look at the powers that be today and are tempted to think we can do nothing to change the world. The big government objectifies foreign people by buying more nuclear weapons, implying we are willing to wipe them out if it suits us. They objectify the poor through bureaucracy, computers making assumptions about motivation sanctioning benefits. Huge economic systems flash money around the world in split seconds, so fast that if the Bank of England’s public announcements are leaked a few seconds early to traders they can make serious money, and yet Universal Credit first payments cannot arrive for weeks. That appalling contrast simply must be a governmental choice. We can’t change all this. We’re too small.

We look inward, too, at our own lives and feel we’ll never be good enough to impress God. But those funny details nag at something, don’t they? They seem to tell us we are not meant to wait for perfection before we set about making a difference. Small acts of defiant kindness, any little gesture that affirms a stranger’s humanity, each moment making people laugh or being delighted just that someone else looks happy, all defy the cynical use of the world, and the manipulation of people that appear essential to worldly success. This story reverses the power spectrum. We see the shepherds’ emotional energy and the emperor’s calculation and immediately know who is really alive. We imagine the new parents just trying to be good enough, to get through the day, the night, and feel their “Yes”. Looking

further ahead we're moved and challenged by the generosity of foreign strangers with their evocative gifts and wonder if the wise travellers' gold was what Mary and Joseph eked out to survive a few years in Egypt where, like here today, it would surely be very difficult to secure any benefits as a migrant. What acts of kindness allowed them as Israelite neighbours, with their complex history, to stay in prosperous Egypt?

In a terrifying world, a host of small kindnesses, each seeming insignificant, amounted to an enormous disruptive miracle, making enough room for Jesus to grow and listen and speak words of eternal life. We remember him. We remember without romance the harsh environment and we remember the imperfection that becomes the very point. God comes to affirm the glory of our clumsy humanity; to sanctify tenderness when the world seems brutal; to forge community when anyone tries to lead by fear; to celebrate the miracle of a human being existing at all, when objectifiers want to categorise and control. He comes to beckon our "Yes" when cynics want to say "no."

The labour pains of Mary, the curses of Joseph that he can't ease her pain, the cry of that infant mingled with the shout of the Shepherds, let alone the singing of angels, burst through the defences we build. "I can't make a difference-" and "I'm not good enough-" defences are rendered ineffective. Cynical objectification is shown to be drab as can be.

So in your life, however untidy, or unpromising, or unglamorous, or unnoticeable, non-ideal, or un-influential you might think it to be, what does your "Yes" look like?