

The shepherds waited impatiently in the queue. Too bad their fields were the other side of the check point into Bethlehem.

What's the reason for your visit?

How do you tell an armed guard that an angel told you that the Saviour of the world had just been born?

But before he had time to attempt an answer, the second question followed:

Where's your ID?

In the hurry to get to Bethlehem, it got left in the field, along with his jacket.

No entry to Bethlehem for that Shepherd.

And yet there is something that tells us that if that shepherd today had indeed been told by the angel that the Saviour of the world had just been born, and that God wanted him to visit this child, he would have found a way into Bethlehem, nothing would have stopped him, even if it meant climbing the 8 foot separation wall and risking being shot.

Some things are just too important, more important than comfort, or safety.

All of us here have felt some echo of that importance. We have got up early, perhaps woken by children excited to show the contents of their Christmas stockings, perhaps to start preparations for lunch, but early and organised enough to be here in church, ready to sing carols of praise and joy. And it is beautiful, the flowers, the music.... Christmas is wonderful. But we have made it safe.

On our Christmas tree at home we have baubles, some are made of plastic, and if they fall off the tree they bounce. Some are made of glass, and when they fall they shatter. One, the last remaining one of a set, is very delicate, very special, I always hang it at the top of the tree, attempting to delay the day when that one gets broken too. It reflects the light in a quite different way from the others, making them look coarse by comparison.

It is often the way that the most beautiful costly things are fragile. That is most true of Christmas.

The message of love to the world came through a baby, totally vulnerable, needing support from his parents, born away from home, forced to be a refugee, seen as a threat before he could even speak. The gift of love is still very fragile, easily harmed, and yet beyond price. Beware the plastic imitations.

When Jesus was born, Bethlehem was in occupied territory. Those who administered the law were often corrupt. There was no pity for the poor. It is not vastly different today.

It was into this far from perfect risky environment that God came. He did not come to overthrow the rulers, or to impose a new society. He came to change things from the bottom up, person by person, as each recognised that real love had a different kind of power.

Each age has its crises. Then it was Roman rule, with local Kings robbed of most of their power and terrified of losing status too; religious authorities under threat, having to keep a low profile. Today we are worried about our position in Europe, the changing face in the middle East, about our diminishing pension prospects – there will always be something to worry about, something to threaten our security and comfort. If we allow them to, these worries can crush our delicate gifts of love, side track us, so that we no longer see the beauty. Distract us, so that we no longer even search for it, content to have a safe replica, something less precious, but less easily damaged.

But in the quiet moments, those times when the words of a familiar carol touch a chord that unexpectedly lifts our spirits or even causes a tear to form, at those moments, we know there is more, and if only we could reach it our hearts would be full to overflowing.

That something is here. It is all around us.

It is freely on offer, a reckless generosity that can not only restore our family life to fullness of love, but overflow to those in need, those who feel unloved, unwanted.

It is a gift that made shepherds do the unthinkable and leave their flocks, their livelihood, to go in search. And it is here for us. We don't have to travel, don't have to endure great hardships, it is there, so long as we acknowledge its worth.

Receive that gift, the gift of the love of the God, this delicate precious wonderful gift. At the communion rail, Christ gives his life to us, in bread and wine and in his blessing, that we may be one with one another and one with God. United in love and in joy.

And may you have a wonderful Christmas.

*Mary Bide*