

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 8th December 2019

Matthew 11: 2 - 11

Last week I was invited to the Fox Covert Primary One Nativity show. It was a wonderful, dramatic, faithful portrayal of the Christmas story with all the usual characters, extraordinarily good singing, and great performances. It is the third year I have been to the P1 Nativity at Fox Covert. It is always a pleasant break at a busy time of the year. It is always lovely to be with happy children, proud parents, and exhausted teachers who, by the time of the P1 Nativity, are buoyed along by the knowledge that this is the beginning of the end of term.

Most importantly, though, at the P1 Nativity, I always learn something new. Not just about the Christmas story, but about who we are as people, and about the world we live in. This year my education came at the end when Mrs Budge, the headteacher, congratulated and thanked the children for their performance, leading the audience in a well-deserved round of applause. Then, she wanted to thank the teaching staff who had taught the children the story, words, and songs of the Nativity, and had directed their acting. Mrs Budge said to the children, 'You have done a wonderful job, but surely you didn't do this all on your own, did anyone help you?'

As one body, 30 children chorused, 'No, no one helped us.' 'Surely you must have had a little bit of help,' said Mrs Budge. 'No,' said the children, 'we did it all ourselves.' 'Not even a tiny bit of help,' asked Mrs Budge. 'No,' said the children, adamantly. Wisely, Mrs Budge gave up asking the children and pressed ahead with leading the audience in thanking and applauding the P1 teachers.

This conviction from the children that they had done it all themselves without any help reminded me of my son, Aidan, who a few weeks ago, one Saturday morning, went with a group of children from his school class to learn to dive. He was very unsure about going, but with quite a lot of encouragement from his parents he went, and enjoyed himself a lot. When we suggested later that our encouragement had helped him, he flatly denied that any encouragement had taken place. He was adamant that he had made this achievement all on his own.

Those two incidents of children asserting their place in their world irrespective of the role that adults play in their lives reminded me of comments I have heard Sir Andy Murray, the champion tennis player, make throughout his career. When he wins, he is often asked to acknowledge the contribution over the years that his fans, his coaches, and especially his family have made to his victories. Sir Andy is always gracious in acknowledging the place of others, but he is also always adamant that whatever their role has been, it is he who has had to play the tennis, play to exhaustion, and win the matches, not they. Ultimately, in his mind, his triumph is his achievement.

This year at the P1 Nativity, I learned that whatever role you play in another person's life – perhaps as a teacher, or a parent, or a coach, or a minister even, that role and the contribution you make don't automatically give you any rights or even any place in the life of another person; whatever your role you have no right to be acknowledged, thanked, or included. The rights stay firmly in the possession of the child or the adult you have taught, coached, encouraged, supported, cared for, or ministered to.

It is often thought that if children or adults have rights – the right to be cared for, supported, protected, coached, respected, for example - then they must also have responsibilities – the

responsibility to say thank you, for example. Whether or not that is true, it is not how the United Nations understand rights.

People of any age have rights irrespective of anything else. That they might also have responsibilities towards others is a completely different matter. When it comes to children it is, as we have heard, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child that sets out what children are entitled to in this world. Like all human rights, the point of the Convention is not primarily to protect children or care for children, but instead to ensure that our world, governed as it is in every way by adults, has enough room in it for children to develop and flourish.

That there is an issue in this adult world of ours about whether there is enough room for children to develop and flourish should not be news to those of us who are disciples of Jesus Christ and who celebrate Christmas. After all, at the very beginning of the story of our faith, in the original Nativity Story, we discover that for the as-yet-unborn Christ-child when there was no room at the inn.

At the very beginning of the story of Christianity we discover that our world was hard-pressed to make room for God, when God was born amongst us as a child. The reason there was no room for God when God entered the world, was because God was born a baby, and children, especially the very youngest, and even more so those as yet unborn, are the most vulnerable people in our world.

Had God entered the world as a 'man dressed in silks and satins'¹ as Jesus said in our Gospel reading this morning, then you can be sure there would have been plenty of room for God – everyone would have stepped aside for him.

Everyone in the world is more powerful than a baby or a child. That is why babies and children often have to yell and scream, fight and tussle, to find room in this world, a space for themselves at home, and a place in adult lives. If they didn't, they would too often be left out in the cold, or, as they grow, their lives as children would be taken over by adults for the benefit of adults. And that is why the United Nations has had to draw up a Convention that makes room for children in this world, with no strings attached.

There was no room in this world for God when he came as a vulnerable child. That is probably why when he grew up to become the adult we know as Jesus Christ, he empathised so greatly with everyone in this world who discovers: that there is little room for them here; that the lives of those who are stronger, more powerful, or more wealthy take up most of the space; that help and support for the weakest doesn't come free, but often at a cost to their autonomy; that rights the strong take for granted are only available to the weak if they accept the responsibilities the strong attach to them.

Making room at the inn of this world for those people who are often left out in the cold was the first thing the homeless child Jesus did when he grew up; to everyone's surprise, even to the surprise of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin, who had known Jesus since they were children. Whatever John was expecting Jesus to do, it wasn't to focus his work of the salvation of those society often has no room for, the deaf, the blind, the lame, the lepers, the dead – that is those separated from God and society – and the poor. With incredulity about what Jesus was doing for these people, John asked, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect another?'²

¹ Matthew 11: 8

² Matthew 11: 3

Throughout the weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas we hear the voices of many prophets, not just John. In particular we hear the voices of prophets from the Old Testament such as Isaiah and Micah who, like the voice of the Psalmist we heard today, make it abundantly clear that God has a particular interest in those people the world has lost interest in. As we read this from the Psalm morning:

The Lord feeds the hungry and sets the prisoners free. The Lord restores sight to the blind and straightens backs that are bent. The Lord loves the righteous and watches over the stranger. The Lord gives heart to the orphan and the widow...³

This attention from God towards the marginalised and the weak, the people to whom doors are closed and for whom there is little room in this world, appears particularly in times of crisis. Whenever Israel was threatened with invasion or exile, the prophets of God drew the nation's attention to the injustices of their society, the oppression some people faced, and the lack of concern Israel had for the marginalised and weak. Crises of invasion and exile couldn't necessarily be thwarted by addressing these issues, but the prophets knew that Israel would be better able to cope with disaster if it was a society that was held together by strong bonds of love for everyone. After all, a house divided against itself cannot stand.

The Primary One Nativity I saw this week was so good not because it would have wowed the West End theatre critics for its stunning production performed before rapt audiences in the greatest theatres, but because it tells a story about love, with a cast of unlikely characters, performed by people who are amongst the weakest members of our society, supported by those who are committed to teaching them, before parents who were desperately proud of children who are being taught that there is room for them in our society and that they have Rights; a right to an equal place in our world.

This Advent we prepare to celebrate Christmas remembering that this Nativity story is about someone for whom there was no room in this world, but who grew up to make room for others, and thereby to become our Saviour, Jesus Christ. We should remember that, because when we don't love each other by making room for those who struggle to find room neither our country, nor us as individuals, will be able to withstand any struggles ahead of us.

When God came to earth to include people in his life, people flocked to him to include him in theirs. By including others in our lives, we discover that we ourselves are included in lives of others.

³ Psalm 146: 7 - 8