

Bennochy church 4th December 2016

If you lived in Aleppo in Syria, what would you want as a gift from God this Christmas? It is humanitarian disaster that unfolds day after day on the media, but it is one we will never experience. We can sympathise. We can condemn the people who have allowed this to happen. But we are left with a sense of hopelessness. Is there anything we can do to help alleviate their suffering? Is the gift they ask for, too big? The gift of a normal life. As a child, it is not normal to have to avoid snipers, bombs and artillery shells. Here is another question. Is God not strong enough to intervene? As people of faith, I think that a question we all struggle with?

Intervention is exactly what God did 2000 years ago. We are told God took human form, and denied all expectations, as he arrived in the world, not at the head of a mighty army, but as a helpless human child. In a moment God intervened in human history. He broke all the conventions and became part of his creation. Power became vulnerability. The Kingdom of God, came to earth.

The scriptures are full of the stories of Gods interventions. Relived and retold down through the centuries. A people led from captivity and into a promised land. A people exiled to foreign lands and brought home to Jerusalem. A people who waited for a king, and got a child.

I want to ask the question, what made that moment in Bethlehem so different, that God decided he had no option, but to '*pitch his tent*' in the world. If that is true, can anything else in history, be compared to the coming of God. The problem is, we have wrapped this 'God event', in Christmas paper, and have lost the impact of the gift. As a church, we have colluded in making the incarnation of God, a children's story.

The second Sunday in Advent, is when the church traditionally remembers John the Baptist. For John, there seems no doubt that something of great value had happened. God has indeed entered the world, and his call was to point the way. If you read about John the Baptist, his words are not about Christmas. They are about baptism. He does not retell a nativity story, but proclaims a message of a new kingdom, rooted in the ancient texts, and says to the people, I am pointing to the one sent by God. They knew what that meant. They were a people waiting for the promised Messiah. John says to them, God has intervened in the world. Love and justice have come together. Forgiveness is offered and the spirit is promised. The Messiah is here. There he is. Son of man, no longer the Christ child.

The question that is going through my mind is this, does God intervene in the world today? How is the incarnation of God repeated through history? How does God act and is acting, in

Scotland in 2016? Is God turning a blind eye to the suffering of the Aleppo's of this world?

One thing I think is clear, the "God event", we call Christmas, will never be repeated. God will never again be born as a child into the world. The miracle, and I am convinced of this, is not God's normal way of working. The rules are only broken occasionally. Only once was a child born to usher in the Kingdom of God. For everything else, there is the ordinary.

We often ignore the miracles of the world. Not where the laws of nature are broken or bent by God, but in the normal and every day. Is not the birth of any child a miracle? Is not the beginning of new life, the intervention of God into the world. Is not every birth a "God event"?

Does God not intervene where compassion is shown and where justice is seen and where hope is offered? Where there is love is there not God, incarnated in the world. Where there is truth, is there not God. Where a light shines in the dark places, is there not God.

"The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.

⁶ God sent his messenger, a man named John, ⁷ who came to tell people about the light, so that all should hear the message and believe. ⁸ He himself was not the light; he came to tell about the

light. ⁹ This was the real light—the light that comes into the world and shines on all people. (John 1)

The chances are we will never walk the streets of Aleppo in our life time and witness first hand its devastation. We will never physically carry in our arms, an injured child, but we can encourage compassion and hope and justice where there is none. In faith we have to believe, that we can bring God into such places? Or, what is the point!

Our actions, the justice of God. Our compassion, his love and God's message, our words of hope. Each one, an intervention by God, each one an incarnation of God into his creation. Each one a miracle of the ordinary.

The search of the men from the east who followed the light of the star, is only the beginning of the journey. Our journey passes the door of the stable of Bethlehem, but, it is only the Easter event that gives us a sense of direction.

Like the angels, we might sing praise to God, but we need to journey from the hillside, the place of God's incarnation, to a place outside a city wall, and in our acts of faith, hope, justice and love, intervene on God's behalf.

To the people of Aleppo, our hope is peace. In justice, may we act. Amen.