

STILL BURNING

One of the characters in our children's Nativity play last Sunday was Archie the Donkey. Or rather the character was Donkey and the boy playing the part is called Archie.

What Archie the Donkey had to do was to precede Mary and Joseph around the circumference of the congregation and stand beside the humans as they looked for accommodation. To keep Archie in good shape at no point did Mary actually sit on him. And then once they reached the stable his job was simply to sit down and rest.

It seems that the journey had got to Archie the Donkey because he lay flat out on the floor, head on the ground, and when the children got to that line in the famous carol – *"the little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay"*, Archie was lying on his back looking up at the sky with his arms and legs stretched out as far as they could go in a star shape. The poor donkey was jiggerred!

Someone afterwards remarked that it was good that the donkey was getting some attention at last because the donkey in the story was often overlooked, and I had to point out to then that strictly speaking there was no donkey.

The Bible is our only source for Jesus' birth stories and it never mentions a donkey, just as it never mentions camels for the wise men, just as it never mentions any animals at all - except sheep - and they were up on the hillside.

The Bible doesn't mention a stable either, but it *does* mention a manger (and that is an animal feeding trough), so it could well be there were animals close at hand. The fact is that our traditional Nativity stable scene is based on tradition and guesswork on our part.

A few years ago the Pope mentioned this fact in one of his books and there was a great uproar.

He pointed out that the Bible doesn't mention animals at Jesus' birth, then admitted that they might have been there anyway, we just couldn't be sure, and certain folk went crazy.

Without the traditional nativity scene, Christmas itself would be pointless!

One newspaper headlined with – *"Killjoy Pope crushes Christmas Nativity traditions."*

A couple of newsblogs had – *"Benedict – the new Grinch that stole Christmas"* and *"Top of the Grumpy List for 2012."*

But the award for the most hysterical headline of all goes to the newspaper that proclaimed: *"Pope cancels Christmas!"*

Are we getting our nativity displays technically right?
Let me ask : What does it matter?

It's who Jesus was and all that he did that matters.

That's what's really important – not what happened at the moment of his birth, or how many early visitors he got, and when they arrived.

It's like arguing over whether the shepherds should be on the right and the wise men on the left of our Nativity scenes. Or vice versa.

Who cares about that?

The exciting thing about Christmas is not that there was an unusual or fascinating birth.

The exciting thing about Christmas is that we remember the one who has come to change the world completely. Jesus is simply the most amazing extraordinary person this world has ever seen. And that's why we celebrate his birth.

One of the ways we remember Jesus at Christmas time is to think of him coming to us like light into darkness, and what is so great about that picture is not just that it is still relevant but that it's still true - because in the words of John 1:5; *"The light shines in the darkness but the darkness can never put it out."*

No matter how dark this world appears there is always the light of hope. Jesus had brought hope and inspiration and an alternative that still shines out even now in 2016.

When Jesus was born the world was seriously dark.

There was uncertainty.

There was systematic injustice and oppression.

There was a mighty Empire that bullied everyone in its path.

There were huge divisions and gaps in income.

There were corrupt rulers and leaders.

The poor had no prospects.

Those who were looked down on and despised had no champions.

There were religious teachers and leaders who should have known better but they didn't honour God's way in what they said and did.

Does that sound familiar? It's pretty much like the world we live in today....

And into the darkness God sends a light –
someone to bring hope,
someone to start a revolution,
someone who had a new and better way to live,
someone who could change our world for the better.

Alongside the darkness there was now a light - the hope of change.

The hope that our world doesn't have to be like this.

The hope that life can be different.

The hope that there's a better way to live.

The hope that that the bullies, and the armies,
and the prejudiced and the hateful

and the greedy and the smug aren't always going to have the last word.
The hope that our world can be better.

Jesus being born doesn't change the fact that our world can be a very dark place.
But Jesus has brought something else into the world – a message and a
programme of caring, justice, peace and love – and that means that an alternative
is burning brightly even when the news seems dark.

The world is dark but there is also light.
And nothing the world can do can ever extinguish that light.

This is one of the big things we celebrate at Christmas – a truth that is with us
everyday and one which will always remain true in our world.

The Lord of the Rings Trilogy of books are surely the most famous of all fantasy
novels.

Fantasy is not everyone's cup of tea but it's a good medium for exploring the
great themes of life.

Even though fantasy stories usually seem to be about other people (even other
life forms!) and often based in other worlds, fantasy stories often touch on the
big themes of this life and the choices we face.

J R R Tolkien was a Christian and one of the great themes in this work is the
relationship between good and evil and hope and despair.

At one point, when everything seems black, Frodo (the main character) turns to
his friend Sam in despair.

Frodo says, "I can't do this, Sam".

Sam replies, "I know.

It's all wrong.

By rights we shouldn't even be here.

But we are.

It's like in the great stories Mr. Frodo.

The ones that really mattered.

Full of darkness and danger they were,
and sometimes you didn't want to know the end.

Because how could the end be happy.

How could the world go back to the way it was when so much bad happened.

But in the end, it's only a passing thing, this shadow.

Even darkness must pass.

A new day will come.

And when the sun shines it will shine out the clearer.

Those were the stories that stayed with you.

That meant something.

Even if you were too small to understand why.

But I think, Mr. Frodo, I do understand.

I know now.
Folk in those stories had lots of chances of turning back only they didn't.
They kept going.
Because they were holding on to something."
Frodo : "What are we holding on to, Sam?"
Sam : "That there's some good in this world, Mr. Frodo. And it's worth fighting for."

(J R Tolkien, The Lord of the Rings, p738)

Despite the bigotry and prejudice there is good in this world.
Despite Isis and Boko Haram there is good in this world.
Despite the vested interest of world leaders there is good in this world.
Despite the Trumps and the Putins and the Assads there is good in this world.
Despite the cruelty and unfairness and sadness we witness each day on news broadcasts there is good in this world.
Despite the heartless indifference from some of richest and most influential people on the planet there is good in this world.
Despite the stupid things said and done by people who claim to be Christian who ought to know so much better, there is good in the world.

And it's worth fighting for. And it **will** be fought for.
Because Jesus inspires us to do no less.

Jesus brings us a blueprint for living.
And God offers us the resources we need to speak and act and live in a better way – to be part of a movement to create a better world – where life is stronger than death, where hope is greater than despair and where love is greater than hate.

Jesus has come into this world to turn it around for the better and still he inspires people today to walk in his footsteps to live his way and to find ways to heal rather than harm this planet.

Yes there is still darkness, still uncertainty, still sadness and pain around us. But thanks to birth of Christ there is also still love and caring and healing and hope.

Despite all the events of 2016, and the feelings of uncertainty we may have looking to the future, we rejoice this night that there is a light shining in the darkness.
That light is still there.
It is still burning, and nothing will ever put it out.