

The real thing

24 12 17

Almighty God,
you make us glad with the yearly remembrance
of the birth of your Son Jesus Christ:
grant that as we joyfully receive him as our redeemer,
so we may with sure confidence behold him
when he shall come to be our judge.

Our text this morning is the opening verse of the Magnificat, Luke 1, verse 46, Mary's song of joy, outpoured to her cousin, Elizabeth, knowing she is pregnant with God's child, Jesus – God with us:

'My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.'

Christmas Eve – almost there. Yesterday, the Carol Service; St Bart's packed with local folk, the birth of Christ celebrated at the heart of Dinard and in the hearts of Dinardais. Today, sadly, no Crib Service as such but the crib figures brought up to the side altar during the first hymn. Tomorrow, a service of Holy Communion to celebrate the incarnation, the birth of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ, a beautiful baby laid in a manger for a crib.

And today, with our beautiful, early twentieth-century crib figures in place, figures that were given to us by Heather Pankhurst and our late, long-time

chaplain here, the Revd Donald Pankhurst, I'd like to remind us all once again of our Jewish roots. The birth of a Messiah was long-expected at the time Jesus was born and our faith, as Christians, is rooted in the spiritual values current at the time that Jesus grew up as a boy in Nazareth. The Torah, the Law, is essentially a moral code to enable spiritual life to flourish. Essentially, the principles of the Torah are enshrined in the Ten Commandments though, in fact, there were 613 of them, but this morning I'd like to focus only briefly on the second:

'You shall not make for yourself an idol . . .

You shall not bow down to them or worship them . . .'

Exodus 20 v4 – 6

If the first command is to worship the Lord our God, then the second is not to worship idols. In Judaism, Islam and more Puritan forms of Christianity, there is an absence of representational art. In the Orthodox church, however, there is a rich tradition of icons of which we have two examples in our church: St Bartholomew and St Philip. To the Greek philosophical mind, an icon is not an idol because an icon is only two dimensional while an idol has three ! An icon is a picture, a door if you like or window that opens onto the spiritual reality with which we are trying to connect. An icon of a virgin and child may well be something to reverence and respect but it is not itself the real thing but a way of accessing what we are seeking. I'm guessing that stained glass windows of which we have so many beautiful examples here could be justified on the same grounds.

But what about statues or our crib figures ? Well, we don't have any statues here in church unless you count the figure of St Anne and the one of the BVM on the

window ledge in the sacristy but we do have these wonderful, English crib figures. Are they idols ? And the answer is clearly not. We don't worship them or bow down to them but we do treasure them as figures which encapsulate a moment in time in our spiritual story – the nativity, the scene in a stable of an inn. It is a story, visually produced, and as such appeals to a certain way of making sense of reality. As a boy, I loved the comics my family bought for me: The Beano, The Dandy and The Eagle, and here, in France, there is a rich tradition of picture books for adults and children. Images are one way of making real what we see in our hearts and minds.

Of course, if you are of a different temperament, have a different way of perceiving reality, Quakers for example, you may hear God speak to you in silence and in a plain, undecorated room, you may, in your mind's eye, well be connected with God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But there is another way, a visual way of being in touch with our God. By doing so, we are not worshipping idols but simply using images to see what is hidden from us.

And if we can and if we do, then we too can be like Mary, the virgin mother of God's son, Jesus, whose birth we celebrate again tomorrow. We, too, can be full of joy and pour out that joy in singing carols and by seeing, once again, a crib full of familiar figures.

I have spoken in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Preached at the Eucharist

St Bartholomew's, Dinard

24th December 2017

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