

Christmas 2018. A sermon preached at St Andrew's Church Soham by the Revd. Eleanor Whalley, Vicar of Soham

Let us pray: From the written word, through the spoken word, may we all encounter the Word made flesh. Amen.

I suspect I'm not alone as a vicar

in spending most of December

looking out for a lead for my Christmas sermon.

I listen to the news, and I race from a to b

looking out for an image – or a situation -

that will serve as a springboard for whatever I might say on Christmas Day, or Christmas Eve.

This year's springboard

came during a school nativity play.

It was the nativity produced by St Andrew's School's reception classes.

I watched that nativity twice,

and both times, the same thing happened.

Both times

the star got stage fright.

A little girl, adorned with bright blue fairy lights, as befit a star,

set off from a bench at the side to the back of the school hall.

When she got there, it all proved too much.

The star dissolved into tears.

Three wise men and two out of three camels (the whereabouts of the third camel is a story for another day)

were following along behind her,

but the star was gently and patiently escorted – escorted in a manner so typical of the staff of St Andrew's School -

not to Bethlehem, but to a place of refuge behind the ranks of seated angels.

There she had a cuddle on somebody's knee.

As I watched that – as I watched the disappearance of the star –

I thought – isn't life like that?

Aren't their times in life –

times in my life, times I would imagine in your lives, times in our national life, times in other people's lives –

when a star is nowhere to be seen?

Times when we lose direction; when we lose a sense of purpose; times when darkness engulfs us.

If we want an extreme example of that,
think of Indonesia right now.

In very different ways,
my guess is we'll all've known times
and we'll all know people who've known times –
maybe people going through times now -
when a star – when light – seems to have disappeared.

For many people, that's what it will feel like this Christmas

You don't need me to tell you that.

We might ask where the star went.

We might ask why it went.

Another question is what to do now the star has gone.

In the nativity, the children carried on.

When you're in reception, I'm guessing, it's not unusual for a member of your cohort to dissolve into tears.

The three wise men and the two out of three camels weren't at all put off
by the disappearance of the star – they simply kept going without her.

And that, it struck me, was a living demonstration
of part of the Christian message.

Although the children didn't know it,
they acted out part of the message of the Gospel reading I read just now.

The star is just a pointer – it is, in Biblical terms 'a witness'.

It's helpful if we can see it, and it's encouraging if we can see it,

but the star is not the most important thing: the star is not – as it were - the star of the show.

John, in his Gospel, doesn't mention a star.

Instead, John mentions John the Baptist.

John the Baptist, in John's Gospel, has the role of a star.

He comes as a witness, to prepare the way: 'there was a man sent from God whose name was John':

John the Baptist comes to point to Jesus.

'He himself was not the light,' that's what John writes. 'He came to bear witness to the light; the true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.'

The true light

is the child in the Bethlehem stable.

Later on in the Bible,

another John calls Jesus 'the Day Star', 'the bright Morning Star',

the light that darkness has not overcome,

the light no darkness can quench.

The three wise men and the two camels, aged 4 and 5, had their sights set on finding the baby.

They continued to Bethlehem.

Their focus was Jesus – not the star.

So where, we might ask, is Jesus today?

John's Gospel calls Jesus 'the Word';

'the Light of the World';

'the light' that 'shines in darkness'.

Two thousand years ago,

Jesus came not to a rich place,

but to a nowhere place.

Jesus was born in poverty,

and he lived among a nowhere people.

He lived among ordinary people; people, in other words, like us:

'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.'

For the first thirty years of his life on earth, no one really noticed Jesus at all.

Then, when the time was right,

Jesus called together a bunch of nobodies;

he wandered about teaching, meeting people and telling stories;

he went around healing. He made friends with people who knew darkness first hand.

He made time for all who – knowing their need - were ready to receive the light and the life he came to bring.

So Jesus came, and so he still comes – comes to inhabit the darkness of this world;

comes to be among us; comes to shine as light in darkness.

So he brings light to all who will receive him; giving us power to become children of God.

So he brings light to the darkness of our lives. May we and all God's children find him there. Amen.