



A sermon for the Eucharist of Christmas Day at Wells Cathedral, preached on Thursday 25 December 2025 by the Right Reverend Michael Beasley, Bishop of Bath and Wells

Christmas invitation to another world

Some years back I ran the London Marathon. Don't worry, I shan't be doing it again. The training and the event itself were fine. My problem was my neglect in raising enough funds for the good cause that had secured my entry in the first place. It was all very embarrassing.

My wife, who's never one to pass by any moment when she spots weakness within me saw her opportunity. 'I'll help you,' she said, 'I'll do your fundraising. Provided you make to me some promises in perpetuity in return.' I was on the ropes.

This is why, almost twenty years later, I still find myself each Advent saddled with the responsibility of producing the annual Christmas letter to be sent out to our friends and relations.

And much, much, much worse, it's the reason why I find myself, each October, lumbered with being the person in our house responsible for filling out the annual tax returns.

I hate doing the tax. It involves spreadsheets and calculations, record keeping and engagement with bureaucracy. OK, maybe if you're an accountant you love this stuff, but for me it's an activity of such surpassing dullness that it seems to suck the joy out of existence, accompanied by the prospect of getting fined if you get it wrong. The whole exercise leaves me asking: 'Is this what life is really supposed to be all about?'

I don't know if it's ever occurred to you but it's out of an experience, not a million miles from the one I've described, that the Christmas story that we heard read to us today begins. 'In those days,' says Luke's Gospel, 'A decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.'

Why did the Emperor want this? Because he wanted to send everyone a tax return. The Christmas story begins with a young couple caught up in just the same kind of mundane form filling that marks out many of our waking moments

– an experience similar to all the thrill that we associate with queuing for the supermarket checkout or of being held by a so-called help line that keeps on telling us our call is very important. Only for Mary and Joseph it's worse than most of us ever experience. Our involvement with all this stuff doesn't usually involve a 75 mile walk to our partner's ancestral village while we are 9 months pregnant. Nor does it involve childbirth in an unstaffed, unhygienic animal shelter.

Jesus having been born, Luke shifts the focus of his story to another group of people who may well too have been wondering: 'Is this what life is really supposed to be about?'

Being a shepherd living in the fields, keeping watch over your flock by night, might sound idyllic when set to music by Handel. But contemplate the actual reality. Of spending your nights out in a cold field far from the nearest loo. Of carrying with you every day the subtle yet clinging aroma of sheep. Maybe all undertaken on a zero hours contract. Not exactly the dream job most of us would want.

It's into this crushingly ordinary reality of a get up, do your work, do your time, do what you're told existence that in our Gospel reading another world breaks through. Luke tells of the shepherds that '*an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them.*' As the story continues, this angel is joined by the whole host of heaven, setting the sky alight and singing with a joy that shatters the night.

For many of us, our image of this scene is deeply shaped by our participation in, attendance at or subjection to the nativity plays of childhood. But Luke's description is not about a group of tinsel clad toddlers. The words he uses describe nothing less than the heavenly army itself breaking into the everyday life of our world. And, not surprisingly, Luke says that the shepherds' reaction to this experience is one of sheer terror. It's like nothing they've ever seen. It's an experience of reality they've never encountered.

What's the reality in which you find yourself living? Living as you do here in Wells, most of you will be pursuing an urban existence of daily cosmopolitan sophistication and excitement that makes the lifestyle of James Bond, the cast of "Friends" or any picture spread in 'OK magazine' that you can conjure up look quite dull.

Or just maybe, on reflection, your existence is a bit more akin to that of Mary, Joseph and the shepherds – the kind of get up, do your work, fill out this form, do what you’re told, ‘is this what life is really supposed to be about’ existence that is the lot of most of us.

However you’d categorise yourself, the invitation of Christmas extended to all of us is just the same. It’s an invitation to experience a whole other world, a different existence, another way of seeing reality altogether. It’s an invitation to know the life of heaven here, now, around us, amongst us, within us.

How do we encounter this other world? The invitation today is to do just as did Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. It’s to meet with Jesus. The one who is born into a situation as simple and humble as any of ours, whose first visitors are as everyday as any of us could muster or be.

Yet as the stories of his life go on to show, when people meet this Jesus, really encounter him, it changes us for ever. It opens possibilities we’d never thought of. It creates convictions and connections we’d never imagined possible. It gives us a peace and a purpose we’d never contemplated in our wildest dreams could ever exist. All we have to do to encounter the one in whom all this is to be found is to step forward and say ‘yes.’

In a few minutes, this is exactly the invitation I’m going to be making to you. When we celebrate the presence of Jesus right here, in the midst of us in the meal by which we remember him, I’m going to invite you to step forward to receive the bread and the wine or to ask that God’s love will shower into your life by receiving a blessing.

As you step up, please will you open your heart to find room there for a desire to encounter Jesus and the utterly different reality he offers to each of us. To find within ourselves the spirit of the shepherds who said this:

‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ Amen.

The Right Reverend Michael Beasley, Bishop of Bath and Wells

25 December 2025