

Christmas Eve Watchnight

Awkward people, awkward stories

Luke 2:1-20

The world needs awkward people at Christmas and throughout the year. Do you know the kind of people that I mean? The kind of people who are always the ones to say those inconvenient truths which we would rather not hear. The kind of people who do something, or represent something that we would rather not see, or have to deal with; but we know, in our heart of hearts, that they are right.

Take Greta Thunberg. That troubled, and troubling young woman. Consistently and persistently speaking truth to power. In fact, speaking truth to everyone about climate change. She is an awkward person. She has said:

"We children are doing this to wake the adults up. We children are doing this for you to put your differences aside and start acting as you would in a crisis. We children are doing this because we want our hopes and dreams back."

Well, that's awkward.

And so is this, when she went on to say at the UN Climate Change Conference in Madrid a few weeks ago:

"Well, I am telling you there is hope. I have seen it. But it does not come from governments or corporations. It comes from people."

Well that's awkward too. It's awkward when a sixteen year old tells us something that should be stopping all of us in our tracks. Whether what she says is all true, or partially true, Greta Thunberg is the kind of awkward person we need at Christmas, and all the year round. Her evergreen message, that we are called to be better stewards of the world, is one we need to hear.

The writer Matt Haig is an awkward person. He writes for children and young adults, and has also written a memoir about his struggle with mental illness that nearly destroyed him but also about how he learned to live again. "*Reasons to Stay Alive*" is an awkward book because it doesn't shy

away from one of the scourges in the lives of so many people: depression and poor mental health.

He writes of his depression and anxiety:

“But now (the tears) came. And not normal tears either. Not the kind that start behind the eyes. No. These came from the deep. They seemed to come from my gut, my stomach was trembling so much...And once they came they couldn’t stop...”

That’s awkward. It’s awkward when someone clearly describes what those dark feelings can be like. But it’s important to say it and to hear it. And to hear also that for some in those dark places, as for Matt Haig, that “light is everything”, and that if you want to live:

“Appreciate happiness when it is there. Sip, don’t gulp. Be gentle with yourself. Listen more than you talk. Be kind. Live. Love. Let go. Three in the morning is never the time to try and sort out your life. Don’t worry about the time you lose to despair. The time you will have afterwards has just doubled its value.”

Awkward, because it’s not easy to be pointed, however waverlingly, out of the darkness and into the light.

The Christmas story is a palace of awkward situations and awkward people. The star is awkward.

How did it move? Did it move? What was its relevance?

The shepherds are awkward. Social outcasts, unclean, on the edges of things, untrustworthy, unreliable.

The wise men are awkward. Non-Jewish, yet at the heart of the birth story of a Jewish Messiah.

Foreigners. Believers in astrology.

The angels are awkward. Supernatural messengers. Appearing and disappearing. Hardly easy for a C21st audience.

Bethlehem is awkward. A backwater in a failed state, hardly the place for a king or saviour to be born.

Joseph is awkward. An old carpenter. Married to a teenage bride, what was all that about?

Mary is awkward. A pregnant, unmarried mother with dangerous political views about turning the world upside down, if you listen to her song, the Magnificat.

Jesus is awkward. A baby, wordless, of uncertain parentage, and of the lowest class. Born away from home. A refugee and immigrant within weeks of His birth, and that's just the beginning of the awkwardness of Jesus. He grows into a man Who challenges authority, reinterprets old traditions, associates with the morally doubtful and the socially untouchable, asks questions, confronts stereotypes. Dies disgraced, disappears, reappears, disappears.

Yet for all the awkwardness at the heart of the Christmas story, it never fails to stop us in our tracks and make us think. It charms and it disturbs. It cuts through the white noise of C21st living, and keeps us out of bed at nearly midnight, and warms us, and stills us, and makes us think, and I mean really think, about the kind of world we live in, and the kind of world we want to live in now, and in the future.

It's familiar and unfamiliar. It's music soars and makes even the most emotionally repressed join in with word and song. It brings us to Church, where most no longer go, and not many can give good reason to say why.

But it is through the awkwardness of this Christmas story that we see through a lens of hope a possibility of what a world might be. Where the heart of Christmas, the Christ-child, will come to speak of a world needing cared for, and a world needing fed; of a world needing befriended, and a world needing healed; of a world needing to respect the needs of the vulnerable child, and a world having a place for the disenfranchised. Of a world soul-sick of cynicism and despair; a world needing integrity and hope.

Hope is awkward. It refuses to be still, but comes whispering and challenging and encouraging, until we have to do something about it. The world needs awkward people, like Greta Thunberg, and Matt Haig. The world needs awkward stories like Christmas. It's people like them, and stories like that, that point from darkness to light, from destruction to rebuilding, from despair to hope, and from death to life. They point to us and ask us what we will do, and what we will be.

May the awkwardness of Christmas, and what lies at its heart, speak to your heart today, and may it bless you, heal you, comfort you, enlighten you, challenge you, and save you, so that when

you leave this place, you might know that somehow, tonight, today, the Christ-Child of Bethlehem has touched your life yet again, and you are the better for it.

“When the song of the angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When the kings and the princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flock,

The work of Christmas begins.

To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nation, to bring peace to the people, to make music in the heart.”ⁱ

Amen

ⁱ Howard Thurman, ‘The Mood of Christmas’