

Speaker 1: [00:14](#) Hello, welcome to this episode of St. Andrew's Enfield podcast with me, Steve Griffiths. As I record this podcast since 2018 and we're just heading into Christmas week. And I say that because you could be listening to this in any week in any year of course. Uh, but as this is being recorded, we are living in tumultuous days in the UK, uh, with the ongoing saga of Brexit continuing to divide our nation along lines that 10 years ago would have seemed completely inconceivable. In a previous job I had working in a theological college, I used to frequently lecture on political theology. And as part of the introduction to that course, I would do a day exploring the landscape of British politics. And it seemed so easy back then teaching students what ideas were Left wing and what ideas were Right wing, what the centre ground looked like, and the core values of Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties.

Speaker 1: [01:20](#) But you know, I just could not give those lectures now because the political landscape has changed beyond all recognition. And the previous categories of political belief mean very little to us now. And globally we continue to see difficult times as well. There are unstable governments in Europe and the wider world. There are wars, there are civil wars and global terrorism and cyber terrorism, uh, is increasing on a huge scale. And locally, in Enfield in London where I'm a parish priest, we face deep social challenges as well. Our High Street is radically changing in the light of rising business rates and the usage of Internet shopping amongst other pressures, um, affordable housing is becoming a real issue for many people and perhaps most worrying of all, locally in 2018 from my perspective, has been the rise of two particular trends; the lack of resourcing to support those with mental health problems

Speaker 1: [02:30](#) and also the rising youth violence, particularly knife crime on our streets in our town centre and in our Borough more widely. These are very difficult days. And I bet that, whenever you're listening to this, wherever you are in the world, you will have your own illustrations of a tumultuous world situation, um, and very real challenges in society that you too are facing locally. And in this podcast I want think with you about the Christmas story and how it relates to social transformation and to think about how we can work to improve society and the place where we live and to draw some lessons from the Christmas story to underpin our thinking on this. And the Christmas story really does speak to us about this issue because the Christmas message, of course, is all about God stepping out of heaven as it were and coming to dwell with us in the context in which we live.

Speaker 1: [03:39](#) We read in John's Gospel that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. The Son of God left the glory of heaven and he came to earth, um, to get his hands dirty, to embrace our world in all of its beauty and all of its joys, with all of its problems, with all of its agonies. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. When Jesus began his ministry in Palestine 2000 years ago, he began by announcing the Kingdom of God. He stated that the Kingdom of God has drawn near. But what does that actually mean? What does the Kingdom of God look like? And most importantly for us, what does the Kingdom of God look like today for our church in Enfield or for your church wherever it is that you live? And we, we don't want to think conceptually about this. We need to find our place within the plan of the Kingdom of God and to think about what we can do to make a positive difference for our local communities.

Speaker 1: [05:13](#) I've been a Vicar for twenty five years now and, in that time, I've been priest of 10 different churches in the Midlands, in Essex and East London, Cambridgeshire and now in North London. And one of the things that consistently strikes me about being in parish ministry is the way in which congregations genuinely do love their local community. And they want to do what they can to shape their local community for the better. We may think to ourselves that actually we've got very little to offer in this regard. Uh, the problems we see locally may run so deep, the hill may seem so steep to climb, and we think, well, what can we possibly do to make a difference? We may feel powerless in the face of deep rooted issues in our community and in the world. But the Christmas story is a story about how the powerless are empowered, about how the weak are made strong, about how those who may feel insignificant have been chosen by God to make a significant difference in the world. This is not just a nostalgic story from 2000 years ago. It's a story with a deep inner meaning that provides meaning for us today. At the heart of the Christmas story is a comparison between the power systems of the world and the power system of the Kingdom of God and how if we, if we work for social transformation through the values of the Kingdom of God, then miracles really can happen and lives really can be transformed. So let me explain what I mean by that.

Speaker 1: [07:29](#) When Luke tells the Christmas story in his Gospel, he starts by telling us of the census which the Roman Emperor had ordered. In verse one of Chapter Two, he says, "at that time the Emperor Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Roman Empire." And of course in those days, nobody liked the Roman census. It was such a disruptive experience. By law, you had to register in the place of your birth, which for many meant leaving

home, leaving employment, and going perhaps on a long arduous journey back to their home town or village, you know, it would have cost time, it would have cost money, and what did you get at the end of it? You got a tax return from the Roman Inland Revenue. Great! Who wants one of those? And sometimes there were riots when a census was called and people had been killed in the rioting. Nobody liked the census. And nobody liked the very clear political message that it sent out, which was about the overwhelming control of the Romans. The census was a profound symbol of political authority. The politicians were in charge. The Emperor Augustus was in control and if the politician said jump then everybody had to jump. In the face of this oppressive political system, people felt disempowered. There was no doubt where the earthly power lay. It was in the hands of the emperor Augustus. It was in the hands of Quirinius, the Governor of Syria. But the Kingdom of God was about to break in and everything was about to change in a manner that no one could have anticipated.

Speaker 1: [09:35](#)

In verse Eight of Chapter Two of the Gospel of Luke, we read this, "There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields." So here we move from the ultimate power of the Emperor Augustus to the ultimate powerlessness of the humble shepherds in the field. And here God is beginning to signal something new about the true values of the world that cannot possibly be embodied in any political system, either in the first century or in the 21st century. And if we want to work for the improvement and transformation of our local community and the wider world, we must embody the values of the Kingdom of God in our approach. I mean, yes, of course we can work in partnership with the existing political system and, as individuals, we can even work within the political system itself. But however we find ourselves relating to local or national politics for community transformation, we must necessarily embody the values of God's kingdom in our actions. So what are those values that are exhibited in Luke's version of the Christmas story? Well, there's three things that I want us to think briefly about in this podcast.

Speaker 1: [11:22](#)

And the first is this, that the disempowered and the marginalized play a key role in the act of transformation. When God began his work of social transformation, he started with the shepherds. Now, shepherds were marginalized. They were powerless people in those days, they lived on the edge of society, both physically and emotionally. They had no place in the politics of power. And yet it was the shepherds that God chose to be the first actors on the stage of this drama. The

Emperor is bypassed. The Roman politicians are bypassed. Quirinius the Governor of Syria is bypassed. But God chose the shepherds. He chose the blue collar workers in society, the disregarded the powerless, the ordinary people in the community, the very people who felt like they had the least to give. God chose the least powerful people to be the first witnesses to his glory. And the same is true for us today.

Speaker 1: [12:53](#) Now of course, God can and does work through the political system. But that doesn't preclude the rest of us from being used by God to transform society and our local community. Nobody is powerless in the Kingdom of God. All of us have a role to play. And together as we, as we seek to embody the values of the Kingdom of God, we can make a difference for the homeless, the hungry, those with mental health issues. We can challenge racism and homophobia. Together, we can build a better society, a better community, and network with politicians and those of other faiths and those of no faith to build the local community that we want to live in. So nobody is powerless in the Kingdom of God. And together we can make a difference.

Speaker 1: [14:08](#) And the second thing I want to say from this passage is that the world was transformed through a child. As well as choosing the disempowered and the marginalized to be key characters in this drama, God chose to reveal himself through a child and to transform the world through a child, Jesus Christ. And this is a real challenge for us as a church and as a wider community to put children and young people at the heart of who we are, at the heart of what we do, and to resolve to learn from them, and even be guided by them, in building a transformed community. I think increasingly wider society has an uneasy relationship with young people? Firstly, many of you, many of us who are older - like me - really don't understand the world of young people. The use of social media and gaming is moving so fast.

Speaker 1: [15:15](#) Uh, many of us can't keep up the way young people use language. The music they listen to, the place of fashion and technology. It all changes at such an incredible pace that that many of us can't keep up. And secondly, if we're honest, many of us who are older are scared of young people. The media so often portrays young people as feral gangs in hoodies, concealing weapons and dealing in drugs, wandering around our streets with violent intent. There are hardly any positive portrayals of young people in the mainstream media, and that has bred a culture of fear in many local communities. It certainly has in our community here in Enfield in North London. But the Christmas story is about putting a child at the centre and

trusting that child to embody the values of the Kingdom of God for the transformation of the world.

Speaker 1: [16:30](#)

And I wonder - could we take the risk of putting our children and young people in the middle and be prepared to learn from them, to be led by them into the building of a stronger community rather than always seeking 'to do for' our young people. Could we be vulnerable enough 'to be done to' and to learn from our young people? Could we take the leap of faith and rather than fearing young people, could we not do everything possible to embrace them and to listen to them? Now, of course there is a lot of really good work that goes on in that regard through faith organizations, schools, youth clubs, uniformed organizations and sporting activities and so on. But there is still, it seems to me, so much more to do and so much more for us to learn about what it means to empower young people and to engage them in community transformation.

Speaker 1: [17:59](#)

So from this Christmas story in Luke Chapter Two, we've thought about how the disempowered were chosen by God to play their part in social transformation. And then we thought about the, uh, how the wisdom of a child, transformed the world. And my third and final thought really from this passage is that if we want to transform our local communities, then true strength is revealed through humility and not through aggression. Um, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, comes into the world and then is not clothed in royal robes, but wrapped instead in strips of cloth. Now it seems to me it's no coincidence that there are only two occasions in the life of Jesus when he is wrapped in strips of cloth. The first is here in Luke chapter two, verse seven, where it says, "Mary gave birth to her first son, wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger."

Speaker 1: [19:08](#)

And the second time is in John Chapter Nineteen, verse 40, after the crucifixion where it says, "taking Jesus' body, the two disciples wrapped it in strips of cloth and laid him in a tomb." So Jesus began life in strips of cloth in a manger. And then Jesus ended life in strips of cloth in a tomb. So these strips of cloth, not even proper clothing, um, are an ultimate symbol of humility. They indicate to us that Jesus embodied, not his royal status as the King of kings, but his status of humility as a servant for all people. From manger to tomb, Jesus embodied royal power, not through force, but in acts of love and compassion. From manger to tomb, Jesus showed us that authority is not to be grasped, but is worked out through service and through love. And this is such an important value for us to take away from the Christmas story as we resolve to work for the transformation of

our local community and the wider world; that this type of transformation will come about, uh, not through aggression or power plays, but will only happen as we seek to be servants of our local community.

Speaker 1: [20:52](#) We can only bring about that, that lasting transformation through acts of kindness and love and compassion and service. So as we look to the future, maybe we can resolve to think through what we can do to serve our local community. Perhaps through volunteering, but certainly through acts of kindness and compassion.

Speaker 1: [21:29](#) So in the Nativity story, as told by Luke, we find these three very important truths about the values of the Kingdom of God, through which our society can be transformed, through which our local communities can be transformed. Firstly, that no one is powerless in the Kingdom of God. We all have a part to play. Uh, secondly, that children and young people can teach us how to build a better world if we will only create the space for them to do so. And thirdly, that the greatest strength we have is not exhibited through aggression or powerplay, but through kindness, love and compassion towards others. At Christmas, the true Lord and Saviour came to us not wielding weapons of war or earthly power or wearing royal clothes. At Christmas, Jesus came to show us a better way; a way of empowerment for all, a way of embracing the young, a way of kindness. These are core values for the transformation of our society, core values of the Kingdom of God. So I would urge all of us to do everything we can to embody those core values as we work together for the transformation of our local communities, this Christmas time and beyond.

Speaker 2: [23:19](#) So thank you for

Speaker 1: [23:21](#) listening to this episode of our podcast. I hope it's been useful and has helped you to see something positive out of the Christmas story, maybe in a new way. If you've got anything you want to raise with me, if you've got any questions you want further conversations about, please do email me: steve.griffiths@london.anglican.org. Please check out the church website standrewsenfield.com, the Facebook page St. Andrew's, Enfield. And please do subscribe to our podcast and please do share it with others. So if you're listening to this prior to Christmas, then I hope that you have a wonderful and blessed Christmas and wherever you are, whatever you're doing, uh, I pray that today will be a good day for you and that you will know the transforming love of God in your life. So thanks for listening. See you soon. Bye.

