Crib Service 2018

My favourite new Nativity song that I heard this year was called ‘What a squash, what a squeeze’. It was performed with considerable relish by the 5-6-7 year olds of Newland House, who all had beaming smiles as they sang the word ‘squeeze’. You’ll be pleased to hear that I’m not going to get you to sing it – I did the singing sermon last year. But I want to use it as my theme.

It was obviously a song that described the crowded situation in Bethlehem as Joseph and Mary searched for a place to stay. But it felt like a song that could be used to describe quite a lot of our Christmas experiences.

Go into Kingston at anytime during December, and ‘what a squash, what a squeeze’ is a very mild version of what I’m generally muttering to myself. Go into a pub after this service and it’s probably what you’re saying to yourself as you try and make your way to the bar.

Most wonderfully for us here at church, it’s what half of Teddington says as they come to these Crib Services. We thought that introducing a third service at 2pm would reduce the squash and squeeze at the later ones – but it only seems to encourage more people!

Perhaps there’s something about the Nativity story that always involves a squash and a squeeze. Well, this year I went to great lengths to find out – I took my very first trip to Bethlehem – the proper town of Bethlehem in the Holy Land. There in the center of the town is a large ancient church, called the Church of the Nativity, which is built over the spot where Jesus is said to have been born.

The actual spot is underneath the church in a cave or grotto that is only big enough for 20 or 30 people at a time. Since there are hundreds of people wanting to visit the grotto every day, you have to wait in a big queue. And the closer you get to the cave entrance the less polite the queuing gets – so that by the time I got to the narrow steep steps I was firmly wedged between a large Ukranian lady and an even larger American gentleman and I could hardly breathe, let alone move of my own free will. In this fashion you somehow descend the steps, get a 5-second chance to touch the all-important stone before you make your way up again to breathe and unstick yourself from your fellow pilgrims.

If I was expecting a quiet and profound spiritual experience I was always going to be disappointed. But there was something true to the original Nativity story in the sense of discomfort, danger and loss of control that resulted in the squash and the squeeze. Mary and Joseph had to deal with far greater discomfort, danger and loss of control when they were squashed and squeezed by circumstances in the first Christmas.

The most amazing claim we make at Christmas is that God chose to enter into the squash and the squeeze of our chaotic human lives in the person of Jesus. This began quite literally with the dangerous and traumatic squash and squeeze of human birth. It then continued all the way through to being squashed by the political authorities of his day and squeezed by the nails on a cross. This is a remarkable claim to make, because it means that God is always with us, no matter how squashed and squeezed we feel. And I invite you to ponder the truth of it – and whether it fits with the faith you find within yourself, the yearning you have for meaning and hope.

I’ve wanted to reassure you that Christmas is intrinsically a time for feeling squashed and squeezed and there’s nothing wrong in that. But if there’s one thing to not squeeze out – it’s that little bit of time to reflect on the great wonder of a God who comes to be born as one of us.

Amen.