

“A STORY OF HOPE”

Matthew 1:18-25

Well, despite the glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel, the prospect of a vaccine for this virus, this Christmas looks like being a very different one from any that we've encountered before. Even for those who experienced the deprivations of the war years will find it difficult – and it comes at the end of a year of enormous difficulties for all of us. This virus has caused all kinds of problems for us – directly, as it has affected the health (physical and mental) of people close to us; our family, our friends and colleagues, even some of us watching this today – and indirectly, as it has caused financial difficulties, ended jobs, closed businesses, affected education, messed up holidays, weddings, funerals and other significant events, and done all kinds of damage in other ways. It's been a real *annus horribilis* for pretty well everyone, really.

So how do people of faith – Christians like me – manage to cope with all this? Can we rationalise it? Can we somehow fit it into what we have always believed about God and his world? Are there answers we can offer to others? Well, different people have different approaches. Some will try and explain it all and try to squeeze it into some kind of rationale peppered with verses from the Bible: it's God's judgement, it's God's way of testing us and strengthening our faith, it's a sign of the imminent return of Jesus. Others will try and provide very reasoned arguments about what's going on and why. Some will ignore it all together and hope it will go away. Others will say that God's in his heaven and it will all get sorted out eventually – then we can look back and see just what God was really doing by allowing all this. All I can say today is that none of those attempts to explain things is fully satisfactory – all of them have some pretty big theological and philosophical holes in them. That's because most of us want complete explanations and watertight reasons for it all and they just aren't there – and if they are our limited human minds just can't locate them.

Francis Spufford is a writer – a novelist and a writer of non-fiction, as well as Professor of English and Creative Writing at Goldsmiths University in London. He's also a Christian, and before all this stuff blew up, he wrote an excellent little book called *Unapologetic: Why, despite everything, Christianity can still make surprisingly good emotional sense*. It's not a work of academic theology and the style and language wouldn't be everyone's cup of fairly traded, but it's entertaining and thought-provoking. Writing about the “cruel world” in which we live, he says: “We **don't** say that God's in his heaven and all's well with the world; not deep down. We say: all is not well with the world, but at least God is here in it, with us. We don't have an argument that solves the problem of the cruel world, but we have a story.”

As those who believe in God and claim to follow Jesus, we can see an over-arching meta-narrative, a big story, which doesn't explain everything to us, but does go some way to helping us make sense of it all. Now Lyotard, Foucault and all the other post-modernist philosophers whose thinking has trickled down to

us lesser mortals through films and novels and media of one sort and another, say that we shouldn't trust meta-narratives. But that's just because they're jealous, I think. We do have a story in this book, The Bible, which speaks of God's creation of and activity in this world. It draws stuff together in an amazing way and helps us catch glimpses of what is really going on as God looks at the world he has made, realises that the presence of evil within it has spoiled it and made of it something very different from what he originally intended, and takes the initiative in putting it back to rights through Jesus Christ.

And Christmas is a small but essential part of the story. What we are cranking ourselves up to celebrate in a few days' time is crucial to this narrative. It's not just about Jesus coming down, saying some nice things and trying to get us all to be nice to one another, before paying the price for his rather disruptive way of saying all that and ending up executed on a cross. It's about what we heard in that reading from Ann a few moments ago. The Bible story says that he was to be called "*Immanuel – which means 'God with us'*". In this astonishing story of the eternal, majestic, all-powerful, peerless God limiting himself in the body of a vulnerable and fragile baby, being born in a particular geographical place at a particular historical time, we see clearly that God is here in it all, with us.

When we have a year such as we've just lived through, when we approach a Christmas which will be so different from any other, when we find ourselves coping with all the utter rubbish that life throws at us, we can find comfort in the fact that God has not left us to fend for ourselves but has joined us in it. I would love to know what he thinks he's doing. I would love to have a clear, rational explanation for all this. But there isn't one at the moment and all I can do is trust that God knows what he's doing – it will work out in the end and in the mean time I can be encouraged by the story, by the thought that God is standing alongside me and, somehow, looking after me.

You see, Jesus coming into our world changed everything. His teaching is difficult, but it makes sense. And he lived it all out in his own life as he healed the sick, restored dignity to the despised, offered people a sense of meaning and purpose in life, held out hope to the despairing. He showed how serious he was about all that by dying on the cross. And God proved that there was truth in what he did and said by bringing him back to life again on Easter Sunday morning – an equally essential part of the story.

I'm not going to try and argue you into believing. I'm not able to give you clever explanations for it all. All I want to say today is that there is a story which hangs together and helps us to make sense of stuff – and taking that seriously can bring you comfort, healing, hope in a world that seems to have had all the hope sucked out of it. Take a look again at the Christmas story and then read a bit more of this great story of God at work in his world. Take seriously the idea that God in Jesus can really still be with you in whatever situation you find yourself. And allow that to transform your life – now and for eternity.