

St Mary's, Dorchester, Wednesday 24th December 2025, i.e. Midnight Mass.

John 1:1-14

Like a good Vicar, I was thinking about Christmas back in September. One Saturday morning in September, before I got out of bed, I was idly wondering what I was going to preach about at Midnight Mass this year (as you do). A few minutes later, while I was eating my breakfast, I was reading a book about freedom (again, as you do); and the author said something that caught my eye. He was writing about childhood:

Those who care about childhood should care about freedom, and those who care about freedom should care about children. This means caring about the society into which the next...baby will be born.

It struck me that anyone who rocks up at St Mary's at eleven-thirty at night on Christmas Eve has something in common: we're all thinking about the next baby to be born. Maybe we should be thinking about freedom too.

“Those who care about childhood should care about freedom, and those who care about freedom should care about children.” Lots of people think that the struggle for freedom is about removing things that get in the way; but the author of my book says that even if you remove everything that seems to get in the way of our freedom, at some point you're left with the question, “Now what?” “Babies cannot be raised by the absence of barriers,” is another thing the author of my book says. Raising a child – growing a new, free, human being – means we have to do something positive.

Freedom demands things of us. Free people own their personal sovereignty, which means being ready to make difficult decisions, and maybe make mistakes. Free people respond well to the unexpected, they behave in a way that is unpredictable. Free people are mobile: ready to move outside of their comfort zone certainly; but also to move across borders, to see the world from a different perspective. Free people will never accept lies, or settle for partial truths – they relentlessly pursue facts. And free people act out of solidarity with those around them: not just the people they naturally get along with, but also the stranger.

The story of the first Christmas is full of free people. Mary and Joseph; the Shepherds; the Wise Men; Zechariah and Elizabeth; Simeon and Anna... All of them are making positive choices that make for freedom, their own freedom and the freedom of this unprecedented child. Not one of these

characters gets taken in by cynicism or apathy or despair: they are people of virtue. In case you're tempted to think that you could never be like these people I invite you to pick up the book and read it – these are human beings just like you and me. Their world was just as messed up as the one we live in, and they still managed to do the right thing. So can we.

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A lot of what I've just said is simply lifted from the book I was reading back in September. You'll get a sense that I quite like it. But the author says a couple of things I profoundly disagree with. He says, for example, that

No infant can liberate its parents, or give them time, or set policy.

“No infant can liberate its parents, or give them time, or set policy.” I want to say, “Actually Timothy” – Timothy is the author of my book – “actually, that's true for almost every person, almost every infant. To be sure, even as adults we struggle to be free; but there was an infant once who brought a kind of freedom with him.”

The child that I'm thinking of had almost all of our regular human needs and weaknesses. Almost all of them. But from the very first moment he drew breath until the moment he stopped drawing breath – and beyond – he was liberating his parents, and every one of us. His whole life he was giving us time. And every word he spoke made policy: not in this or that state but in what he later called his Kingdom.

That child gave us something; you might call it “the glorious liberty of the children of God” [Romans 8:21]. Or in the words of our Gospel reading this evening:

...to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God...

[and] from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. [John 1:12-13, 16]

To him be glory and dominion, now and forever. Amen.