

Scripture: Isaiah 2: 1-5 / Matthew 24: 36-44

Therefore keep watch for you do not know on what day your Lord will come

(Matthew 24: 42)

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT, AMEN

Sunday by Sunday in congregations all over Edinburgh cleaning items, pots and pans, crockery and bedding are gathered and then taken down to a warehouse in the north of the city to be sorted into Starter Packs.

The warehouse is the headquarters of Fresh Start, a charity which helps people make a home for themselves

Much of the stuff is what people no longer need or use and would have otherwise thrown out, not least the vast supplies of bedding and towels that come from several Edinburgh hotels and Pollock Halls of residence.

Although all the items are carefully checked to make sure they are in good condition, in monetary terms these starter packs are largely worthless.

However given to someone who doesn't have a cup, given to someone who doesn't have a pot or a towel or a duvet these starter packs are priceless.

Alice was one such person, the victim of an abusive relationship, who having been homeless became one of Fresh Start's clients.

She received a starter pack of cleaning products as well as a pack of toiletries, soap, shampoo and body lotion, all items left behind by holidaymakers in one of Edinburgh's hotels.

What a difference it made to Alice.

If the Starter Pack gave her the chance to clean her flat, being able to use sweet smelling shampoo, shower gel and body lotion was an unexpected luxury, and Alice said it made her feel good about herself and helped restore her self esteem and dignity.

Week by week hit squads of volunteers go out armed with paint, paintbrushes and wallpaper to help someone decorate their flat.

Maria was one of the hit squad clients.

Maria couldn't believe people would volunteer their time for her and do it for nothing in return other than the privilege and pleasure of helping her turn her flat into her home.

It was like a beautiful dream she said, they were like angels who just came and went out of no-where.

Angels indeed: angels in painting clothes who helped a young woman who felt worthless find value in herself and in others.

Value in the worthless: as well as a very practical aspect I am sure you glimpse a profoundly spiritual and theological depth to what I am describing.

Within the calendar of the Christian year, we are in the season of Advent, the season when the Christian church turns again towards Bethlehem in anticipation of the birth of the Christ child.

O Come, o come Emmanuel we sing for the Advent season is one of waiting and hushed expectation, of vibrant and trembling darkness and of heart warming anticipation.

In the coming weeks we will tell and re-tell familiar stories about the prophetic vision of a son to be born and a child to be given, of Zechariah being struck dumb with the news his wife Elizabeth was at last expecting a baby and of an angel appearing to a young woman called Mary betrothed to man called Joseph.

We will hear that when Elizabeth's child was born to everyone's surprise - save that of his father - the child was named John.

And we will also recall that after an arduous journey from Nazareth to the city of David where no room could be found at the inn, Mary's child was born in a stable, wrapped in swaddling bands and laid in a manger.

Angels (but not dressed in their painting clothes) will come to disturb shepherds with news of the Bethlehem birth and magi will appear from the east bearing precious gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Advent: the season of waiting, watching and wondering and although many will have heard, known and cherished these birth narratives since your childhood I want you to hear them again, and like Mary, ponder them in your heart.

Why?

Because as well as being the birth narratives of two women, these stories explore the universal human themes of hope and despair, darkness and light, desire and longing, birth and new life.....and this too, they invite us to find value in something apparently worthless.

Therefore keep watch for you do not know on what day your Lord will come

Watchfulness, vigilance, staying awake and being prepared: these are important themes in this section of Matthew's gospel, themes Matthew will return to with his parable of the wise and foolish brides and then his great parable of the sheep and the goats.

Strip away the apocalyptic imagery and what you are left with is Matthew's profound conviction that time has a purpose, life is meaningful and all things find their fulfillment in the providence of God.

And what was the source of Matthew's conviction, the evidence and proof on which he was willing to stake his claim?

Bethlehem was little more than a tiny village some miles south of Jerusalem.

Zechariah was but one among hundreds of Temple priests.

Mary and Joseph were unheard of beyond their immediate circle of family, neighbour and friends.

And how many babies were born in impoverished circumstances that night?

Yet it is to this rural backwater and these unknown people the gospels draw our attention with the most extraordinary claim.

We call it incarnation, the mystery of God taking human flesh, the Creator of all becoming part of creation, the One who breathed life into all life taking a first breath.

And is it true, asked the poet Betjeman, *this most tremendous tale of all seen in a stained glass window's hue?*

The contrast between the infancy gospels and today's celebrity obsessed culture of entertainment could hardly be greater and yet in a way that is just the point - that in an out of the way place and with an unknown couple God kept and keeps God's promise.

Born in a stable, laid in a manger, heralded by angels, visited by shepherds with magi bearing precious gifts; there is no way of proving or demonstrating the historical accuracy of any of this stories, no independent records to act as corroboration.

Sky news wasn't there to record the scene and interview the bystanders.....and even if it had been, how would you prove Mary's son is also the Son of God?

Yet in what many still dismiss as worthless superstitious nonsense, of no value whatsoever, for all who are prepared to wait and watch and wonder Bethlehem's child comes as a blessing and a priceless gift as you discover to your joy you are loved, now and eternally.

Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end, Amen

