

Watchnight Service 2016. Canongate Kirk.

St Matthew 2: 18 *A voice was heard in Ramah...*

Over the last couple of weeks for one reason or another I've been involved with or invited to an even wider range of Nativity and Christmas services and events than usual. The most amusing was the Royal Mile Primary School's Nativity which this year modelled itself somewhat unexpectedly on *Strictly Come Dancing*. The shepherds came on and did a dance, as did the sheep, swiftly followed by the angels and the wise men and each effort was marked by a panel of judges which as with the TV series included a kindly woman – the inn-keeper's wife – and a cruel man, represented by the Roman emperor. I'm sure some of the parents and staff thought I might disapprove but personally I thought the whole thing was fab-u-lous. That was the most unusual production, the most poignant was easily the more conventional nativity acted out by the children of St Crispin's School whose severe learning difficulties meant that their event was as noisy and chaotic and profoundly moving as any I have ever been to. There have been other school services too, Fettes at St Cuthbert's and Heriots at Greyfriars, and away from the school environment the annual army Garrison Carol service in the Great Hall of Edinburgh Castle. It's a spectacular setting, the Great Hall, but with its terrifying array of medieval weaponry fixed to the walls – swords and lances, shields and suits of armour – it always strikes me as a rather incongruous setting in which to be singing of Jesus meek and mild and praying for peace and goodwill on earth. And yet such a backdrop hints perhaps at the tension that lies behind the Christmas story. When the angels and shepherds had gone away, we are reminded how Mary pondered these things in her heart. It's as if she knew that the life of her new-born son would leave the world with much to contemplate, that all would not be meek and mild, simple and straightforward for very long. And when the wise men also left the scene, you remember how they returned to their country by another route, having worked out what Herod really had in mind, a plan that we heard come to cruel fruition in our second reading when a voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation.

A voice was heard in Ramah. In ancient Israel Ramah was a city to the north of Jerusalem, the birthplace of Samuel. But have you noticed how many of these ancient places have a contemporary reference today? It all began of course when Quirinius was Governor of Syria, a Roman governor imposing Roman rule and encountering rebel forces not so very different to Syria these days, and it continued in Egypt where the holy family were still caught up in peril and danger just as Christian families are experiencing persecution in Egypt today. And with every passing act of cruelty and hatred in mainland Europe this year there has been so much wailing and loud lamentation. A voice was heard in Ramah, from Bethlehem to Berlin, from Nazareth to Nice, a voice echoes down through the centuries and cries out for innocent victims of violence and intolerance, a voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation.

The promise of Christmas Eve is that this piercing cry does not go unheard by God, not then and not now, but is answered in the vulnerable cry of a new-born baby, come to share our suffering and our sorrow that we might yet cling to the hope he embodied and be drawn to the light he brings.

*Sacred infant, all divine,
What a tender love was thine,
Thus to come from highest bliss
Down to such a world as this.*

Amen.