

**Sermon Preached on Christmas Eve 2007 at the Church of the
Holy Trinity, Philadelphia by the Reverend Alan Neale
“Are you free?”**

My text has a rather surprising origin and may even merit the term unique... it is from a television programme created by Jeremy Croft and David Holmes that was first broadcast in 1972. The text: “Are you free?”... the programme: “Are you being served?”. It was, perhaps some of you would dare to admit to remembering, it was the question inveterately asked by Captain Peacock of his staff... Mrs. Slocum, Mr. Humphries, Mr. Grainger and Mr. Lucas.

“Are you free... now?” “Are you available... now?”

Of course we all want an immediate and positive answer when we pose that question... no less than when we enter into that confusing maze of impersonal telephone answering services, no less when we encounter that most irksome of notices posted on a shop-window, “Back in twenty minutes?”... but twenty minutes from when!!!

The Christmas story is from the perspective of the Holy Family one in which few seem to be free, to be available... there is no room physically, literally in the inn and there is no room figuratively, emotionally in friends and companions (as John tells, “He came to his own, and his own received him not”) – it is as if from the crib we hear a plaintive voice, “Are you free?” to which there is a resounding cosmic “NO!”.

And yet if we were to ask that question of God... “are you free? are you available?” we would hear a constant, affirming, divine “yes” and this is what we celebrate at Christmas.

God declares to us all, to each one of us, “I am free for you... I am available for you... I am present for you”.

The great and glorious news of Christmas is the eternal, encompassing availability, accessibility of God and though sadly, terribly, the Church often seems to make God inaccessible, unavailable through traditions and rules, through arcane practices and antiquated language... God is accessible in the lowliness, the confusion, the mess of the manger... how much more so in our lives? As the t-shirt asks, “If God is distant, guess who moved?”.

But, friends, tonight we have opportunity not only to ask of God, “Are you free? Are you available?” but also to hear God in Christ asking us, “Are you free? Are you available?”. One wit has recently noted that politicians will often write “we have served on”, “we have fought to”, “we have worked to enact” which are often legislative synonyms for “I was in the room when...”. God in Christ wants far more than for us to be “in the room”, He wants us “to make room” for Him in our lives and that can begin tonight!

I finish by reading to you (you will be thankful that I am not singing them) words from a hymn written by Emily Elliott and first sung in 1864 at St. Mark’s Church, Brighton, England...

Thou didst leave Thy throne and Thy kingly crown,
When Thou camest to earth for me;
But in Bethlehem’s home was there found no room
For Thy holy nativity.

Refrain

O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.
Heaven’s arches rang when the angels sang,
Proclaiming Thy royal degree;
But of lowly birth didst Thou come to earth,
And in great humility.

Refrain

O come to my heart, Lord Jesus,
There is room in my heart for Thee.