

CHRISTMAS DAY 2022
St George's Chapel, Windsor Castle

Two hundred years ago, almost exactly to the day, on Christmas Eve 1822 the English poet and cultural critic Matthew Arnold was born at Laleham in Middlesex. There, sixty-six years later, he was to be buried in the village churchyard.

Matthew Arnold was the son of the famous nineteenth century headmaster of Rugby School, Thomas Arnold, familiar to many nowadays through the Thomas Hughes novel, 'Tom Brown's Schooldays'.

I am pleased to mention Matthew Arnold this morning because, though he was born two centuries ago, I think he speaks for many of us today, especially when it comes to matters of religion.

When Arnold was on his honeymoon, he composed a poem that was only published a good few years later. The poem (one that many of you will have come across) is called 'Dover Beach'. As Matthew Arnold listens to the sound of the ebbing tide over the shingles of the beach at Dover, he reflects that the sea of the Christian Faith, which had been at high tide in our culture for so long, was now ebbing too. He writes:

....now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating to the breath
Of the night-wind down the vast edges drear
And naked shingles of the world.

Arnold expresses sadness at the fact, as he sees it, that the old Christian verities have had their day. But like so many others of his time, in spite of sadness, he found that he could no longer embrace those so-called truths.

As I said a moment ago, I think Matthew Arnold speaks for many people today; no doubt even for some in this Chapel of St George this morning. For many, the old 'truths' have lost authority though, like Arnold, we turn from them with a certain regret.

We remember Matthew Arnold as a poet. However, for many years, his main work was as a Government Inspector of Schools. In fact, at a time when education was a social, religious and political 'hot issue', he made an enormously important contribution to the changes made to this country's educational system during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Even so, he felt that his work was sheer 'drudgery'. Something was missing.

This has a familiar ring about it too. For many of us, however much we are engaged in valuable work, life remains somehow unsatisfactory. Of course, we hide it from ourselves, and others; pretend that everything is fine. Yet an inward unease remains. What, in the end, is the point of it all?

Another of Arnold's poems is called 'The Buried Life'. Just a few lines from it will take you to its core. He writes:

But often, in the world's most crowded streets,
But often, in the din of strife,
There rises an unspeakable desire
After the knowledge of our buried life,
A thirst to spend our fire and restless force
In tracking out our true, original course.

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Mathew Arnold has reluctantly loosened his grasp on the Christian creed but cannot free himself of a profound ache to discover real meaning in his life (something 'more', something 'authentic' and something 'lasting'); an ache (so he makes clear elsewhere) that is shared by all of us, though it is usually buried and hidden from others.

Maybe it is not surprising that Matthew Arnold should still speak for many people two hundred years after his birth, giving voice to those doubts and uncertainties about so much Christian teaching, perhaps reminding them of their sad loss of belief, and yet persuading each us of our ever-present yearning to discover 'meaning'.

What perhaps *is* surprising is that, all these years later, we should *still* bring our doubts and our longings to a Christian place of worship on Christmas Day. What *is* surprising is that, even though we do not know quite what to make of him, we *yet* come to hear the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. What *is* surprising is that, though we thought that our search for meaning would lead us somewhere else, we come *even now* to find some kind of answer given by a baby lying in a manger. What *is* surprising is that, though we believed we had let him go, it seems that he still clings to us.

Perhaps it is that, through the life and teaching of Jesus Christ, we have heard a call and sensed a lure that we cannot get out of our system. The call and the lure seem to come from 'beyond'; from that mystery whom women and men have called 'God', and whom Jesus called 'Father'. They are a call and a lure to know, and to surrender to, the fact that, before all else, we are loved by God, and that that '*knowledge*' can give meaning to and transform our lives in a thousand different ways for good.

That *knowledge* might well be enshrined in the propositional theology with which so many of us fail to engage. But let us not forget that its roots have always been in the human heart before the head. The heart has its special way of *knowing*. When we forget that that is the case, our humanity can be diminished, and our hope for meaning run dry.

The story of Christmas touches the heart. We hear of a God who, in and through His Son, enters the confusion, doubts, fears and lost-ness of this world to pronounce a word of reassurance and of comfort; the word of God's unconquerable love for us.

For the past two thousand years, through the poetry and the music of the story, countless people have heard a *truth* upon which they have based and risked their lives; a truth heard in and embraced by the heart, and in response to which such people have confidently striven to make this world a better place. You and I, their inheritors, owe them much.

Were they deluded? Were they victims of a phantasy? Or were they on to something that we, through a kind of blindness or deafness often simply fail to see and fail to hear?

The fact that you and I are in this place today is evidence enough to show that we are well prepared to listen. Maybe, as we listen, the word of the Word made Flesh will speak directly to our hearts.

