

Sermon for Christmas Day at Holy Trinity Geneva 25 December 2024

Texts: Isaiah 9.2-7; Titus 2.11-14; Luke 2.1-20.

Christmas Day

Crying babies evoke a range of emotions in us. For their parents, generally a response of love and compassion, although sometimes accompanied, with an inner groan if it is 3am! In other people, the sound of a child crying may bring out our sympathy and love. It may also provoke irritation and frustration for the child's cries shatter our inner composure. We love the idea of a baby but feel a silent baby would be best and one who makes no demands on us.

And this is expressed in many ways in how Christmas is portrayed in our culture. How many paintings of the Nativity have you seen with Mary and Joseph comforting a crying baby? I can't think of one. Jesus is always asleep. It's reinforced in our Christmas carols – think of the old favourite 'Away in a manger' - with its famous lines about the baby waking up, 'But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes'.

But the heart of God's gift to us at Christmas is that He comes into our world in love to save us in our flesh – in the reality of our human bodies and what we are really like. If we miss this reality, we miss what Christmas is all about.

We often talk about the 'mystery' of the Incarnation, of Jesus becoming human, and in a way, this is a good description. For at Christmas, we have to hold together two completely different realities. The first is that God, who created the universe and everything which exists including our remarkable planet and each one of us, is utterly transcendent and beyond our imagining. We cannot begin to glimpse the nature and majesty of God.

Yet the second reality of Christmas is that God enters our world as a baby, taking upon Himself our flesh and all the limitations of this world. It is an extraordinary paradox.

Why did it happen? Why did God do it? All that we know is that arose from God's love for us and passionate desire to save us. St Ignatius of Loyola, the great Jesuit saint, had a vision which he describes in his 'Spiritual Exercises'. He glimpsed the three persons of the Trinity looking at our world, looking at its conflicts, the pain humans inflict on each other, the hardness of our hearts and the terrible damage we inflict on the world. They see, with immense grief, that humankind is set on a course of self-destruction. If Ignatius were writing today, he would probably have included our environmental disaster at the core of this vision.

In St Ignatius' meditation, the Trinity decide to send the Son, the second member of the Trinity, to become incarnate, to become flesh and blood as we are and to live as one of us to save us. This is why the reality of Jesus' incarnation, of becoming flesh, is so important for us to grasp.

For this was the only way that God, in His infinite love, could save us. He could, not doubt, have waved a magic wand, rather like Harry Potter, to get the wars to cease, the tyrants and oppressing forces to leave and to compel man and women to live together in harmony. But it would have been at a terrible price – the loss of our free will and ability to choose – in fact, of all that makes us fully human.

God has made us in His image out of love; each person with infinite potential and promise and precious in His sight. He longs for us to be free, free to make choices, to have fullness of life and to become the very finest people we can.

Which is why the only way possible was the path of the incarnation – of God, the Creator of the universe, laying down His power and becoming flesh. In so doing, He accepts the limitations of the world He himself has made, the constraints of space, time and human consciousness as He comes to be born within a human family.

Above all, he comes in the flesh as a newborn human baby with all that entails! There is a tendency in Christianity, and indeed I suspect in all faiths, to see our human flesh as sinful and that what matters is our spirit. Yet this is to forget that God made us as flesh – we are not ‘spirits covered with flesh’ – we *are* flesh and this is integral to who we are.

And it is as human beings of flesh and blood, vulnerable and needy, that we are open to all those qualities which make us truly human in the best sense of the word – compassionate, caring, aware and sensitive to the needs of others. A baby is weak, vulnerable, utterly dependent on others, and evoking love, compassion and commitment. As Jesus is born, his cries would have evoked just these feelings in Mary and Joseph – who pick him up and cuddle him, clean him, Mary feeds him and they swaddle him and lay him to rest once more.

The Christmas story is about the miracle of God’s love spreading in the world through the miracle of the Word made flesh. First to Mary and Joseph, then to the shepherds who are recorded in the Bible as the first visitors.

Why shepherds? Why, among all people, should God send a vision of angels to a group of shepherds outside the town when there were so many, rich and poor already in Nazareth at hand to whom to proclaim the good news?

We don’t know but here are some thoughts. Possibly because the shepherds, living isolated lives much of the time on the hillside caring for their sheep were alert – listening and responding to God’s call. They were practical people, one might say ‘earthed’, used to the reality of death, nurture and birth as they cared for their sheep. And perhaps because throughout the Hebrew scriptures, God Himself is described as the shepherd, the one who nurtures His people, and the Kings had God-given responsibility to nurture and care for God’s people faithfully.

The shepherds come, see the baby, rejoice and worship and then spread word of what they have seen. They are the first witnesses to the incarnation, and I can imagine that years after the event, they would still reminisce, saying, “Do you remember that night when we had the vision of angels?” And so the news of Jesus’ birth spreads.

Today we rejoice in the reality of Christmas – that earthed reality which the shepherds saw and bore witness. Of God born in our flesh, not silent, but full of human needs for reassuring touch, feeding, to be cleaned, cuddled and settled. God, who loves us beyond measure, coming into our world in our flesh, vulnerable and dependent - reminding each one of us our vulnerability and calling forth our compassion.

As the baby Jesus reminds us, in his frailty, of our absolute need for one another and above all for God, may this touch our hearts this Christmas. As we realise just how much God loves us that he comes to save us, accepting our vulnerability, may His love, melt the hardness and selfishness of our hearts, and help us instead, to reach out in love to bring healing to our hurting world.

And as we look ahead from Christmas to the coming year, may we live out God's compassion in our own lives. May our acts of kindness, our welcoming of the stranger and unloved, our willingness to forgive and make peace, help set the world free from the fear, hatred and indifference which freezes us and instead, learning to see and respond to the face of Christ in others.

So instead of rejecting our flesh and its weakness, let's rejoice, that in our human flesh, God sets us free to be fully human and to help make His love incarnate in the world. The first cry of baby Jesus proclaims our salvation – hallelujah!

I wish you a very joyful and blessed Christmas.

Amen

Canon Daphne Green