**The Rt Rev Christopher Foster, Bishop of Portsmouth**

**Christmas Day 2019, Portsmouth Cathedral**

You may be disappointed that the Gospel we’ve just heard doesn’t mention Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph, a stable, a baby or shepherds and wise men. There isn’t even a mention of the name Jesus whose birth we have come this morning to celebrate. Yet, of course the traditional Christmas Gospel is all about him even though it is silent on what we think of as the essential parts of the Christmas story.

It is though very much a story, the story of the coming into this world of God’s son set in the context of the whole human story and of God’s love for his world. ‘In the beginning’, it begins, just as the book of Genesis at the very start of the Bible begins with the same phrase as the story is told from creation to the moment of fulfilment when the Word is made flesh. Nothing is more important for humankind in the story St John tells us today than this climax. And it is important that we clock that phrase, for God was ‘made flesh’ and came among us.

Christians speak a great deal about having the right personal relationship with this baby and the man and saviour he became. He had the same humanity as yours and mine and that is central to our understanding of how he saves and can transform your individual life and mine. But we should not skate over God’s commitment to the welfare of all, of the earth as well as of individuals. God became flesh among us at Christmas. He came into our world and to this earth taking flesh. This is earthy; he came, as we sing, down to earth from heaven.

God’s love for the world has always been real, down to earth. At the beginning in Genesis God works with a palette of real physical things ordering the waters and the land, the plants and the animals, and humankind is created from the dust. The coming of God’s son to the world, his birth at Bethlehem, is not then God briefly engaging with the earthly world. It is specific in its location, in his identity, in the circumstances, and it is the pivotal moment of God’s care and love. Christmas was neither God’s first nor his last encounter with his world and his people. He did become human in Jesus; he became flesh and so shows the world the shape and the values of what the world should be like.

Jesus is the embodiment of the values of heaven in the material world. Today we celebrate the physical reality of God taking flesh oncein Royal David’s city, when earthstood hard as iron in the bleak midwinter, with a cattle shed as a delivery room and a feeding trough as a crib. It was, of course, not going to change and it seemed to end as ignominiously as it began; from the dust of creation, through the squalor of birth and the torment of suffering, to the gore and blood of crucifixion. You cannot pretend that it was anything other than down to earth.

We often prefer to make all this down to earth-ness as beautiful as we can. We want to be charmed by the stable and the crib, to step out of the ordinariness of life for a day or two. We create winter wonderlands in shopping centres and seek to live the Christmas dream as if it were a fairy tale releasing us for a few days from the realities of everyday life. The joy, delight and happiness we feel and share today is not because the Christmas story and message are other-worldly but because they are down to earth and they have now as then the grace and power to change and transform. This is not the stuff of dreams or fantasy but it is a wonder which brings hope and help to us and to our world. In following Jesus we are not asked to step out of reality but, like Jesus, to be deeply earthed in it and so be agents of his change for good.

God comes among us and belongs like us on this earth. So God has a deep concern for the integrity and wellbeing of the earth and his good creation, for the safety and stability of the environment. God’s concern is not only our individual wellbeing and salvation but that of the whole earth. God who came down to earth has a stake in conservation, in recycling, in climate change, in sustaining the earth’s environment.

God did not pop down from earth for a while when Jesus was born, getting his hands dirty for three decades or so. The divine story has always been rooted and down to earth, for he was always here and is here now. By making today a festival day we affirm God is not distant or up there in heaven. Accepting God’s love and care for us and the world, exemplified in taking flesh in Jesus, gives hope of transformation not only to you and me as individual people but hope for the earth, for creation, for the world. God’s values are rooted in the material world, they are absolutely down to earth. When we look into the cattle shed and see the baby in the trough we see down-to-earth heavenly values. We see how God loves his world.