

SERMON PREACHED AT PORTSMOUTH CATHEDRAL
AT MIDNIGHT EUCHARIST 24 DECEMBER 2011

“What has come into being in HIM was life”. (John 1 : 36)

Tonight we celebrate not just one life beginning but that life which enlivens all people, that light which enlightens everyone. This particular birth of this one individual is a cause of rejoicing in just the same way as any baby’s arrival, but as St John explains in the memorable and evocative words from the opening, or prologue, to his gospel, (heard year by year in our carol services as well as on this holy night) this particular life has the potential to bring life to us all. “To all who received him, who believed in his name,” wrote St John, “he gave power to become children of God.”

You and I, children of God! He has become one with us so that we can become one with him. That is why we greet each other with joy tonight. My colleagues and I hope to offer good wishes for a very happy Christmas to everyone of you as you leave the cathedral tonight, and please carry our greetings to those at home who can’t be here for this service. We wish you a very happy Christmas, for Christ has become one with us so that we can become one with him.

We have become almost oblivious to the magnitude of that promise, for we have grown immune or anaesthetised by one too many shopping trips, carols, mince pies, or drinks to the shock and surprise of what we celebrate. Now partying, preparation, and purchasing are no bad thing; indeed even the joy and richness of our worship and music, as well as the generosity or extravagance of our festive fun, can also obscure the simplicity, humility, and nightmare of the Christmas story.

It is something of a nightmare. A dangerous journey of 80 miles on foot or donkey or cart (who knows for sure?) for a pregnant Mary close to full term; birth in an insanitary make-shift delivery room with the animals’ food-trough for a cot; and before long another anxious journey, into exile in Egypt, fearfully avoiding the authorities on the lookout to slaughter all male babies on sight. It is the sort of nightmare that some in our world still face today, but for us the horror is obscured along with the simplicity, the humility, and the inclusiveness of God on display tonight.

If you are used to a preacher, or a bishop, referring to the simplicity and the humility of the birth of Jesus Christ to Mary, with the support of Joseph, but surprised that I mention the inclusivity of God then remember that Mary, single and carrying a child not her fiancé’s, was explicitly chosen by God. Remember that the visitors to the manger were diverse; mistrusted, simple, wandering shepherds from the margin of community and foreign, yes foreign, dignitaries with extravagant gifts and impressive pedigrees. The Christmas story is inclusive of us - you and me, as well.

So what does it take to re-focus our attention on the heart of the Christmas gospel, that in Christ is life, for all, in its fullness?

This year I’ve been helped by the John Lewis department store’s TV commercial. Perhaps you have seen it ‘live’, as it were, or you’re one of its nearly four million hits on YouTube. In ninety seconds we follow a young boy’s wearying wait for Christmas. He is hugely frustrated – sleepless, bored, distracted, badly behaved, exasperated, he resorts to desperation trying to be a magician and make time go faster. He just can’t believe it is so long to have to wait. Finally on Christmas Eve he gobbles his tea, shovelling it into his mouth, and sprints from the table to get into bed and go to sleep as quickly as possible. He wakes on Christmas morning with a huge pile of presents at the bottom of his bed but he ignores them totally. He goes straight to his wardrobe where he has hidden a box, roughly and inexpertly wrapped in red Christmas paper. Carefully he carries it into his parents’ bedroom and gives it to them, his broad smile of delight and joy contrasting with their incredulity. It was as the caption then says, a gift he couldn’t wait to give. He couldn’t wait to give a gift. Now, of course, it’s a drama, rehearsed, written and staged to encourage us to buy at John Lewis in order to give. Nevertheless it makes three points quite beautifully.

1. It is a child who teaches us, and challenges us. Today a child reveals the grace and truth of God; comes with the innocence of a child. It could not be clearer.

2. The advert confounds our expectations. We assume, like the boy's parents, that the long wait is to open presents, but it is to give them. Today God comes wholly unexpectedly, in a quite ridiculous or outrageous way. It was beyond belief and expectation.

3. The boy wanted to give. As we have been reminded God had spoken to his people down the generations and centuries in many and varied ways. He longs to reveal himself by a gift – Jesus in the manger, on the cross, in the fullness of resurrection life.

That is the good news, which comes often as a surprise, in the birth of a child at Christmas. On the brink, perhaps, of a tougher year than most of us under sixty have ever known, there is this perspective to our merry making. Perhaps you glimpsed it tonight in the Christmas edition of Outnumbered, that funny series about precocious and articulate children, who, apparently unscripted, ad-lib their lines, and their anxious parents. As we smiled at the unravelling of the Brockman family's plans to spend a premium bond win on a special Christmas holiday we also confronted mum's father being in hospital, Karen needing a dentist urgently, and their house-sitter wanting to bring her boyfriend for some privacy. So the realities of Alzheimer's, NHS hospital life, and people making poor choices about partners could not be avoided, even as we smiled.

Christmas is not an escape from real life, it's about life. That's why, facing realities, it is surprising but very good news.

+Christopher