

(Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-14)

Now then, they say that for men there are basically three types of hairstyle. Side parted, centre parted and de-parted... And when it comes to the Christmas story there are again three types of response. We can choose to believe, disbelieve, or be agnostic.

So I would like to say thank you for being here tonight. Thank you for choosing to enter in to the Christmas story. Against all reason, we do believe that the creator of the universe became a human being. Perhaps we would echo the words of the third century theologian Tertullian who said, 'I believe because it is impossible to believe!' Or we might be answering John Betjeman's question, 'And is it true? And is it true?' by affirming here at Midnight Mass 'that God was man in Palestine, and lives today in bread and wine'.

At Christmas we are invited to see in that helpless baby, born into poverty, a potent symbol of God's limitless love for us. The Incarnation – in which '...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' – is a revelation of God's purpose of turning upside down the values of the world. In the birth, life, death and resurrection of Christ we are invited to see that God wants to give to each of us life in all its fullness.

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God. ...All things came into being through him.' The Word – more accurately translated from the original Greek *Logos* as 'Wisdom' – is the mind of God. Christ, the personification of that Wisdom, was there at the beginning, instrumental in the creation of 'all things'.

'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...' We should never forget that this outrageous statement – which so many people find hard to believe – has always been exactly that: outrageous – scandalous, even.

A few years after Saint John wrote his gospel, another author in the same tradition wrote the three New Testament letters which bear his name. These letters of John were written with a group of people in mind who were known as the 'Gnostics'. Now the Gnostics were far from agnostic: for them there was a moral distinction between matter and spirit. Matter was inherently evil – indeed, profane – and therefore for them spirit simply could not become flesh. So for the Gnostics there could have been no true Incarnation, only an apparent one.

The letters of John refute this heresy, doing so by exploring the magnitude of God's love for us – and showing that our love for each other is a manifestation of God's Holy Spirit within us. They invite us to conclude that for the Incarnation to be real – and not merely apparent – the Messiah, the Christ, had to come as a helpless baby.

You see, a more accurate translation of: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...' is this: 'And the Word became flesh and *pitched his tent* among us...' So when the creator of the universe became a human being he did not come as some

fully matured royal visitor, staying in five star luxury. Rather, he came as a baby, totally dependent on those around him, and with no home. Here is a graphic acclamation of Christ genuinely becoming one of us, of showing that God does not measure human worth in wealth or power. Christ truly became like us in order that we might become like him.

The Christian faith affirms that Christ further demonstrated his love for us by dying for us on the cross. This, like the circumstances of his birth, shows the utter humiliation he was prepared to go through for us. He then rose again from the dead, thus defeating death. The Christian hope is that 'all who have died in the love of Christ will share in his resurrection'. That is what our baptism was all about. We became identified with Christ, putting to death a life centred on the self and rising with him to an outward-looking life, filled with his presence: life in all its fullness.

A life filled with God's presence is a life filled with the Spirit of the risen and ascended Christ. We received the gift of the Holy Spirit at our baptism, and our lives are transformed as we learn to rely on the grace and power of that presence within us, even in challenging times. In fact, the vision statement of the Diocese of Leeds, puts it rather well: we are 'Loving, Living, Learning'.

But to be 'Loving, Living, Learning' at such a level that our lives can be transformed requires us to be willing to make a leap of faith. Then, as our lives are gradually changed, we see that faith does not necessarily begin with choosing to believe '...the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. Rather, faith begins with experience of his loving presence with us now, through his Spirit and 'in bread and wine'. It is only after we have experienced this presence that we can see clearly where the helpless baby fits in. As the Archbishop of Canterbury once said, 'God is for life, not just for Christmas'.

So when a child looks in to a Christmas Crib and sees the baby Jesus they seem to know instinctively that they are looking at a mystery: something wonderful. In the same way, when we look in to the Christmas story, let us not be agnostic (or even Gnostic!), and fail to see that same mystery, that same wonder.

I close with these words from the first letter of Saint John.

'Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: he sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.

...if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

By this we know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them.'

Thanks be to God. Amen.