

Christmas Sermon 2020

It's a decision that has to be made every Christmas – which gospel reading shall we have for our main Christmas service?

Do we opt for the Luke reading – the familiar story on which countless nativity plays have been based. The story of Mary and Joseph travelling to Bethlehem but finding no room at the inn. Of an apocryphal innkeeper allowing them to spend the night in his stable; of the baby being born and laid down to sleep in an animal's feeding trough. Of shepherds whose night on the hills is interrupted by a vision of angels telling them to go the Bethlehem to worship the baby – the Saviour of the world - who they would find in the manger. And the story that ends with Mary pondering all these things in her heart.

Or do we choose the John reading. The one that portrays the Christmas message as being about the eternal word becoming flesh and living amongst us; the one through whom the whole universe was created becoming a human being like you and me. The reading that talks of this eternal word being a light shining in the darkness of human existence, showing God's love and glory to all. A light that can never be extinguished.

On the face of it they are very different stories. One homely, domestic even, and very down to earth, and the other full of mystery and cosmic significance.

But are they so different?

I think that in this year of all years they are trying to tell us the same important message.

Interestingly there is no mention in the Luke story of a stable, just an animal feeding trough – a manger. Scholars say that the reference to an “inn” is probably not a commercial inn as we might imagine, but a guestroom. Houses at that time would have had space for animals within the home – probably by the door – so that they could be kept safe at night. Sleeping accommodation would be separate; there might well be a guest room as well.

Bethlehem was Joseph's home town. He would in all likelihood have had relatives that he could stay with. But perhaps he had been beaten to the guestroom – after all he and Mary were not the only people heading for Bethlehem to be counted. It would seem from the story that he and Mary had to make do with the area where the animals were kept – but at least they were warm and dry and amongst family.

Some might say that takes away from the magic of the Christmas story, but in my view it adds a deeper significance.

The problem with the traditional nativity scene of overflowing inns, a bevy of harassed innkeepers and a draughty stable is that it is hard to relate to. It's not an ordinary home. If we think of the family house with guest room and animal quarters, bustling with extended family we have a much more everyday setting. This special baby – the one that had come to save the world – was born into ordinariness.

And, perhaps surprisingly, the John reading says much the same thing. To me the key phrase in the reading is in the last verse – the word became flesh and lived among us. Again scholars of Greek would say that the phrase “lived among us” means literally “tented among us”. We could paraphrase it as “semi-detached among us” or even “moved into the neighbourhood”. The eternal word came into the ordinariness of everyday life. The eternal word through whom the whole universe was created came to live an ordinary life.

So both gospel accounts can be read as saying the same thing.

God came to live amongst us in an everyday way in an everyday home in the person of a small baby, born into an ordinary family.

This year we have probably spent more time in our homes than ever before. For two months in the spring many of us were confined to our homes, shielding from the virus. Even since then our choice of things to do and places to go outside of the home have been severely limited. As we approach Christmas celebrations, more of us than ever will be in our own homes.

Whilst acknowledging that for some sadly home can be a place of fear, for the majority of us it's a place of comfort, of rest, of contentment. A place where we can relax. A place where we don't have to put up any pretence of being someone or something that we are not. In our homes and with those we love we can be our true selves.

And the message of Christmas, as told by both Luke and John, is that God came to live amongst us in a home not that different from ours. A 'nothing special' home where there was fun and laughter and sadness and tears. A home to which Joseph probably returned frustrated on some days from his workshop as nothing seemed to go right; where Mary more than likely struggled with the pressures of bringing up children and looking after the house; where the children had arguments and disagreements. Where stories were told, where thoughts and dreams and hopes and aspirations were shared. Where every member could be themselves, knowing they were accepted and loved for who they were.

So the first thought I would like you to take away with you today is that because Jesus was born into an ordinary home and lived in an ordinary home, he knows what ordinary life is like. He knows its highs and lows and its joys and hurts. And because of that, we can feel safe and secure as we share our frustrations and happinesses and our laughs and tears with him. As the carol says “tears and smiles like us he knew”

And the second thought I want you to take with you is an obvious one really. The baby grew up.

Next year will be a bit of a milestone for me. My eldest son will be 40 years old. It doesn't seem possible. It seems like just a short time ago I was holding him in hospital just after he had been born. Afraid of breaking him, not sure what to do with him, uncertain which end I should keep a look out for first.

But he survived my tentative steps at being a father and has grown up. He's not a baby anymore.

And Jesus grew up. The problem with the Christmas story – however lovely and profound it is – is that it places the emphasis on God becoming human in the form of a baby. Yes, the picture of Mary and Joseph rocking God to sleep is an important one. But the message that was lived and taught by Jesus as he grew is far more important.

Leaving Jesus in the manger means we miss out on his wisdom and example and his life changing challenge. The gospel stories tell us of great things that he taught; they tell us of miracles and healings; they tell us of the call he gives to all to live the kind of life that God wants us to live. They tell us that he has experienced the joys and sadnesses and the highs and lows of life just as we do.

They tell us of the demands that he, the Light of the World, makes upon people like you and me to shine as lights in the world as well. In the person of Jesus, who was born into an ordinary home, God calls ordinary people like you and me to live extraordinary lives for him.

So as we think about the Christmas story this year – whether it's the baby in the manger or the word made flesh, let's remember that the story only becomes reality – only takes on its full meaning - when we turn to that Jesus and ask him to be with us not just at Christmas but always.