

Christmas Day

SFX 2023

Apologies for those who tried to join us on the livestream, as you know we had problems that we hope to put right for next Sunday.

It will be a silent night in Bethlehem again this year. The marching bands and carol singers that would fill the city with festive cheer will not be heard, the giant tree and golden lights will not be lit. Christmas is cancelled in the place it begun, at least in its outward festive form. The hope that the Christ-child brings still illuminates the lives of the Christian community there. When will the song of the angels - bringing peace and goodwill - be heard in the Holy Land, in Ukraine and in all the many trouble spots of the world. We find a moment in our hearts to pray for them this Christmas.

One of our carols sums up our prayer this Christmas: *"But with the woes of sin and strife, the world has suffered long; beneath the angel-strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong; And man, at war with man, hears not the love-song which they bring; - Oh hush the noise, ye men of strife, And hear the angels sing!"*

In the Church of the Nativity at Bethlehem, a silver star on the ground marks the spot, tradition holds to be the place where Jesus was born. But to enter the Basilica you have to pass through a very low stone door, that they call the Door of Humility. The only way to approach the mystery of the Word became Flesh is to bend down low. Like the shepherds and the kings, to humble our hearts before the marvel of a God who took on our human features to show his love, to declare his unashamed devotion to us.

Some people say all religions are the same. But no. But as St Augustine put it: no other creed could say *"the word made flesh and dwelt amongst us."* God from God, light from light, born in a stable in Bethlehem.

In the birth of this child, we see that God is loving us **in and through** our own flesh. A surprising, embodied form of love. What does it mean that God comes to us in the flesh? The **mild and tender love of the Godhead revealed in a baby**.

Some spiritual traditions seem to suggest that the way to God is to escape the world. Being human is a problem. But for God it was the answer. He took on the constraints of our humanity, symbolized by the tight swaddling bands. He lived our fears and vulnerabilities, he knew our sufferings. He embraced the fragility of our flesh and blessed it. What we call the Incarnation is God showing a way that is literally down-to-earth. This is the stupendous beauty of the Christmas mystery. God's love is an inside job. No religion comes close to suggesting that God is so daring. *Pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus, our Emmanuel.*

When the shepherds ran to the manger, what did they see? A tiny, helpless child. No great dogma or teaching. Just a child. This human encounter with God in the flesh is the starting point for the way we should look out on the world and look out for each other. He started a revolution of love that is still going on by those who act in his name.

Embodied love. By coming in the flesh Jesus gives us the grace to live well our life in the flesh. This is called **holiness**: learning to love well God, ourselves and others. It is what draws us to this church week in, week out, to be guided in the **School of Love**. If we are to grow in love with this child, then we too must engage with the world in the business of practical loving, to share in the sorrows, the joys and hopes of others. *"Ours are the hands with which he blesses the world now"* as St Teresa of Avila put it.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins passed through Hereford in 1866, a journey instrumental in him becoming a Jesuit priest. He is one of the great poets of the spiritual life, enthralled by the beauty that he saw in the Catholic faith, enraptured by nature revealing the glory of God. Afflicted by depression he would follow his call as a priest into the slums of Liverpool, Manchester and Glasgow. The beauty he saw in the Christ-child inspired him to love the Christ in those around him.

He wrote in a short Christmas poem, Moonless darkness about the new start that Christmas can bring for each of us:

Moonless darkness stands between.
Past, the Past, no more be seen!
But the Bethlehem-star may lead me
To the sight of Him Who freed me
From the self that I have been.
Make me pure, Lord: Thou art holy;
Make me meek, Lord: Thou wert lowly;
Now beginning, and always:
Now begin, on Christmas day.

Today we pray that as the Bethlehem star leads us to manger, the Christ who comes to us in humility may free us to love. Beginning today anew on Christmas Day.