

## Christmas Eve 2022

I wonder what you are doing for your Christmas Lunch tomorrow? Are you visiting family, will you be on your own, or will your home be full to overflowing as children and grandchildren come to visit? This year in our home, it will be just Kate and myself for Christmas lunch. I'm not telling you that to make you feel sorry for us, I am sure we will both enjoy our meal together. But it's a fact, that as our children (and especially our grandchildren) have grown older they want to celebrate Christmas in their own homes.

For the vast majority of us our homes are our safe spaces; places where we can relax and be ourselves. Places where we don't have to wear a mask or pretend or be someone we are not. Places of comfort and contentment. I can quite understand why our growing grandchildren would want to be in their own homes for Christmas. Of course, this doesn't mean we won't be seeing them over the Christmas period, but it will remove some of the potential stress points which could easily happen.

Our homes are very personal spaces for us as well. Places we protect; places we are careful who we allow into. Letting someone into our home is giving them the opportunity to get a glimpse of the real us.

And interestingly homes are at the heart of the Christmas story whether we look at the Luke story of the birth of Jesus that I have just read, or read the opening verses from John's gospel (as we will do in the morning) which give a very different slant – "in the beginning was the word, and the word became flesh etc) . On the surface these two accounts are very different.

The Luke reading is 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 it's a story that ends with Mary pondering all these things in her heart.

The John reading 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 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, as we have said, they are very different. One homely, domestic even, and very down to earth, and the other full of mystery and cosmic significance.

But are they so different?

I actually think that 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 the kind of commercial inn that we might imagine – a sort of 1<sup>st</sup> century premier Inn - but a guestroom in a house. 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, we should remember, 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 by another relative – after all he and Mary were not the only people heading for Bethlehem to be counted because of the census. 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. And it was here they lay the baby in a convenient feeding trough.

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 full of animals is that it is hard to relate to. It’s not an ordinary home. If we think of the family house with guest room, 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 where it says – 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 – God himself - came into the ordinariness of everyday life. The eternal word through whom the whole universe was created came to live an ordinary life.

Both gospel accounts, then, can be read as saying the same thing. God came to live among us in an everyday way in an everyday home in the person of a small baby, born into an ordinary family. Not unlike yours or mine.

So as we think about our homes, as we enjoy being in our homes with family and friends around us this Christmas; this message has something very important to say to us.

God came to live among 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 the carpenter Joseph probably returned frustrated some days from his workshop when 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 some days were good days and some days were bad days. 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 here's a thought to take away with you tonight:

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, its excitements and disappointments. As the carol says "tears and smiles like us he knew". And because of that, we can feel safe and secure as we share our frustrations and happinesses and our laughs and tears with him.

And a second thought you might like to take with you is an obvious one really. The baby grew up.

My children are all adults now with families of their own. But to me sometimes it seems like just a short while ago that I was holding Tom, my eldest, 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. In awe that I had the responsibility of caring for him.

But he survived my tentative steps at being a father and has grown up. He's not a baby anymore. He too has survived those early challenges of fatherhood. His eldest had driving lessons for their 17<sup>th</sup> birthday yesterday!

And Jesus grew up too. 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 and deeply moving 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 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, to follow his example of love and service. 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. And, most importantly, because of Jesus' death and resurrection which we will be celebrating at Easter, we have the opportunity a living relationship with God himself

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 for every day of our lives.

And with those thoughts in mind I wish you all a very happy Christmas.