

## Curated lives and the Incarnation

Two of this year's news stories struck me as brilliant parables. The first involved two students who for a prank placed a shop-bought pineapple on a table at an art exhibition at the Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen. When they returned they were surprised to discover their pineapple protected by a display case, and mysteriously transformed into a work of art. They said they put it on the table as fun, and had even tilted it slightly to the left to give it more "gravitas". The 'work' remained on display until the authorities were alerted by social media.

The second was about an East Yorkshire school getting an unexpected visit from a group of Zulu dancers from South Africa who arrived at the wrong venue due to a mix-up with an address entered into their satnav.

The Lions of Zululand were supposed to perform at a school called St Anne's in West London, but instead turned up at St Anne's in Welton, more than 200 miles away. The Assistant Head said she was "surprised" when "a busload of Zulu warriors came into the school." The group's founder said "The addresses got mixed up. [But] It's been just wonderful. It's our first time here, they never knew about us."

I just love stories like these: gentle, revealing, instructive. They don't slap you around the head with moral instruction; they take you by the hand, often make you smile, and always make you think. The humble, unadorned pineapple suddenly found itself encased in a gallery display, labelled perhaps, and with (who knows, the reports don't say) an art expert's commentary. We might say that at that moment it ceased to be itself, ceased to be a pineapple; it became inaccessible.

And the parable of the SatNav: how lack of geographical familiarity and an excessive trust resulted in a spectacularly confused journey which yet resulted in something profound and good. (The school the dancers mistakenly arrived at served pupils with learning disabilities, who responded with joyful spontaneity and unguarded perceptions).

*We curate much of our own lives.* I don't mean that in a critical way. Not at all. We simply learn to be cautious about what is on show about ourselves, how we narrate our lives, what the label says. And at times we punch inaccurate data into the satnav of our lives, and take spectacularly wrong turns and circuitous routes, sometimes over a whole lifetime.

The Church does similar things. And let's not forget that the Gospels do, too. During its history the Church has been quick to put display cases around its beliefs and doctrines as speedily as it has around its key sites and the bones of its saints. You can understand the impulse but at the same time see the danger. At other times the Church gives us dreadfully muddled coordinates, setting us off on costly diversions.

Remember that the Gospels were written many many decades after the events they record. Virtually certainly not by any eye-witnesses. And of the four gospels to make the cut and get official approval, that of John is closest to the work of a self-conscious curator who has a specific interpretation to offer the reader. That aside, there is quite possibly no text in all Christianity which has the impact of what we heard read to us just now – the opening or *prologue* of John's gospel. *In the beginning was the Word...*

The weakness of much curated material is that however well it is done, it becomes 'other', less accessible and in no time at all, disconnected.

The installation above our heads (1) escapes, I think, this danger: it is not here long enough to become distant; it is not encased in glass; we not so much examine it as gather under its judgement and message; and these clothes that were left by refugees arriving at a Greek island as part of a hazardous journey are mirrored – this very day - by new waves of refugees and more abandoned, used clothes. These clothes may be curated; they are also electric.

*In the beginning was the Word.* It won't be a surprise to know that to serve the Christian community as a priest raises a number of challenges, the greatest of which is how to bring to life the curated artefacts of the faith. And at this season especially. Let's not rehearse the distractions of the Christmas season – it is too easy and can sound snarly. Let's instead join in the celebrations as much as we want to *and* do what we can to avoid the narcotic quality of much of the background messages, including those buried in the Church's carols (actually, not so much buried but, you might say, 'hiding in plain sight').

The story that John is telling is neither cosy nor sentimental. It should really make the hairs on our heads tingle. And now, close to midnight, as part of the first Eucharist of Christmas AD2017, is a good time to let it to do so.

**The claim is this:** God departs from God-like behaviour by tumbling into our human experience in disguise, approaching us in such an unexpected way that we are bamboozled. God becomes available to us not through grandeur or apocalypse or behind a subscription-only paywall but in and through a human baby, one who is not born to power but to poverty, and is born at a time of instability and of military occupation; and born

not in any centre of prestige, but in a remote corner of things, and to ordinary people, people in transit.

There is a prayer, said silently or in a whisper by the priest at the altar at the preparation of the gifts when the water and wine are added to the Chalice: '*by the mystery of this water and wine, may we share Christ's divinity, who humbled himself to share our humanity*'. The Christian claim is that God enters our humanity, that we might know something of God's divinity.

*The Word became flesh and lived among us...full of grace and truth.*

If I could achieve anything in these few words it would be to help reveal the astonishing meaning and possibilities of all this. That God entered human experience in this birth. I wouldn't be surprised if, like me, you have placed the story under a Perspex display case, charmingly illuminated but only something of an exhibit to examine, not an experience to inhabit. This is what familiarity tends to do.

It has to be liberated from all this, its meaning set free to challenge and comfort, which it can do in equal measure. For when we begin to encounter this story freshly, it turns out that nothing is beyond its reach. *The Word became flesh and lived among us: **and so** matter matters* – our planet, our bodies; it is the move of an irrepressible Creator who chooses to identify with us in the most intimate way of sharing our flesh. And this ushers in all sorts of new demands and possibilities - personal, social, political: that it is our business *to love*; that power and politics must serve the common good; that what is available to us from the Earth's abundance is to be shared; that no conceivable measure of difference between people and peoples can ever obscure our unity in and through God's incursion into our lives; that no loss or suffering, terrible though they are, can separate or estrange us from God who meets us in our very bones.

We are heirs, you and I, of the incarnation which tonight we celebrate. If you are aware of parts of your life that are encased and curated, disconnected from the great river of our shared lives and struggles and joys, why not take steps to break out? And if you feel you have been journeying on someone else's satnav coordinates and not your own, why not (metaphorically) turn the damn thing off, throw it out the window, and follow your own star (for which, as you know, there is a biblical, Christmas precedent)? Our truest and deepest freedom is part of the meaning of Christ's birth. And if we don't begin to seek that now, when shall we?

As Saint John says (though more poetically), the Light has mugged the darkness, and there is nothing that the darkness can do about it. Amen.

*Hugh Valentine*

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(1) *'Suspended'* is an art installation hanging over the nave of St James's Church from late December 2017 to early February 2018. It is composed of hundreds of items of clothing discarded by refugees arriving on the Greek island of Lesbos. Image right. Artist Arabella Dorman: [www.arabelladorman.com](http://www.arabelladorman.com)  
See also [www.sjp.org.uk/suspended](http://www.sjp.org.uk/suspended)

#### **The Gospel reading, John 1.1.-14**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

