



## High honour

Welcome to the last Sunday in Advent. We have commenced our descent towards Christmas. Please make sure your seat backs and tray tables are in their upright position and that your seat belt is fastened and all carry-on luggage is stowed away.

I do hope you are surviving the season. It can be a trial: the cost, the noise, the busy-ness, the card-despatching and present-buying tyrannies we impose on one another, the collective message that we're all going to have a damn good time, matched by the inward anxiety felt by some who look forward to it being over. It can also be a time of joy, wonder and sheer magic.

*“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘...do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus...’ All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken ....through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel’, which means, ‘God is with us.’ (from today’s gospel)*

You may or may not regard the gospel birth narratives as 100% accurate. Indeed, there is good reason not to do so. They are not intended for literal mind-sets. It is likely they were formed from conclusion to premise. Yet for those of us brought up in or near the Christian churches, the details of the Christmas story are pretty well bonded to our emotional DNA.

I was wondering what might best be said in this final approach to Christmas. Preachers tend to be repetitive, sometimes because they are unimaginative or worn out but mostly because they are there to witness to *one* message: that God loves us, and in the pursuit of that love somehow enters our material world as told in the birth of the child Jesus.

Most self-respecting Gods are metaphysical and disembodied. In the incarnation we are brought face to face with a God who (so the claim goes) enters our world and assumes human form – becomes *embodied*. God comes amongst us in the child Jesus, born in unpromising circumstances at a time of civil chaos and military occupation when some human lives, much like today, were counted for nothing and others enjoyed great privilege.

It is quite a claim: that God loves us and chooses to enter and partake of our humanity. But we've heard it very often and so perhaps have become accustomed to it; and more than that, it has been glided, gussied-up, elaborated, sentimentalised. Like processed food it has had sweetener added, and it has been co-opted by the interests of commercialism and the market. (That's not really a complaint; religious people who complain about the commercialisation can sound mean-spirited about it all, and quite often we are).

If you like the conventional take on the Incarnation, please stick to it. It does after all have its addictive elements and Christmas might not seem the best time to go cold turkey.

Yet there will be others who for various reasons are ready to look afresh at the Christmas story of the incarnation – the absurd claim that God enters our human predicament in order to share in it in some quite radical way. It is not easy to engage with it afresh (we nearly always under-estimate the effects of our prior learning and habitual thinking, as well as crediting ourselves with too much originality). But it is worth trying. And it is especially worth trying if your heart is wearied in some way or other and if the joy of life feels a touch jaded. A hungry heart is often an enquiring one.

Just as the flight announcement asks us to make sure our carry-on luggage is stowed away, so we need to clear away obstacles when undertaking this adventure. And my, *how hard that is*. It's not so much 'carry-on' but carry-around baggage. We have mountains of it: cultural, personal, intellectual, emotional. I sometimes fantasise about the human equivalent of the computer's 'de-frag' programme. If only. So all we can do is to pay attention to

ourselves, and as far as we can to plot, to befriend and identify the experiences, fears, assumptions and desires that inform so much of our imagined originality.

Not all such discoveries are welcome and some will be difficult but a growing understanding of ourselves always opens the way to healing and growth and wisdom. And it makes us better to live with.

Surely one of the most shocking implications of the Christmas claim is that God chooses to stand with us – to be in solidarity with us. “...and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, ‘God is with us.’” If ever you have been in a serious pickle or a crisis and you’ve had someone who says ‘I’m standing with you in this’ you’ll know something of the power and meaning of solidarity.

Heaven knows why God might wish to honour humans in this way. It remains, though, the central Christian claim. And what it does is to suddenly place each of us in relationship to one another.

Through this honour we are brought into mutual relationships of responsibility. And though we hedge them about with caveats and firewalls, it is surely certain that God *loving us* means we are to love one another. No alleged difference may

obstruct this. No belief, location, racial heritage, fact of gender or age, no sexual orientation, no track record, no body mass index, no disagreeable habit, no stupidity - no nothing.

That we are to love one another is not an instruction but a freely grasped consequence of the informed heart.

How that love is expressed will be personal if we are in one another’s orbit. And where we are not, it will be expressed through systems of social and economic justice and where, in Isaiah’s words, ‘nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more’ and ‘they shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks’. In other words, we are to school ourselves in – and as groups and nations learn – the ways of non-violence.

Does that sound like a description of our planet as we near Christmas 2016? No, it doesn’t. But such a vision remains one of the expressions of the meaning of the Incarnation, once liberated from conventional, tired piety. And it awaits our rediscovery.

Hugh Valentine