



St James's  
Church  
Piccadilly

19 December 2021 Festival of Lessons and Carols Sermon – St James's  
Piccadilly

The Revd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease

**'Ra-ta-ta-tat; ra-ta-ta-tat'; there isn't any room, and you can't stay  
here'**

May I speak in the Name of the  
Triune God, Father, Son and Holy  
Spirit.

**Amen.**

Have you ever been to a  
Christmas nativity play? Perhaps  
to see a young relative having a  
starring role as Mary or Joseph, or  
as an animal, or half of an animal,  
or indeed an angel. Or perhaps  
you can remember your own  
nativity play and how the  
Christmas story was interpreted  
for you.

My premiere treading the boards  
came early on, when I was cast as  
the inn-keeper. Yes, it was me that  
had to turn Mary and Joseph away  
with what I suspect was a  
dishcloth on my head, and sing  
"ra-ta-ta-tat"; 'ra-ta-ta-tat'; no, no,  
no, there isn't any room, and you  
can't stay here, we haven't any

room for strangers." I shall spare  
you the full rendition.

After singing those words, I then  
slammed the door in the face of  
this young baby-faced couple as  
they walked round the stage, until  
eventually offering them the floor  
of the stable, the space I knew I  
always had. How, after such a  
cold and merciless performance, I  
became a priest is testimony to  
God's grace and sense of humour.

**Ra-ta-ta-tat; ra-ta-ta-tat'; There  
isn't any room, and you can't  
stay here.**

Some of us may know of  
the *posada navideña*, a ritual  
celebrated in South and Central  
America and in Spanish-speaking  
countries and communities around  
the world.<sup>1</sup> It is a re-enactment of

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.mexperience.com/posadas-navidenas/>

Mary and Joseph's search for an inn on their way to Bethlehem. Traditionally, this can be a procession through the streets of a neighbourhood with children dressed as the main characters in the story. There are candles and songs and a reliving of this part of the Christmas story, albeit without the contractions and labour pains. What this does is it invites people along the way to take part and step into the story.

**Ra-ta-ta-tat; ra-ta-ta-tat'; There isn't any room, and you can't stay here. We haven't any room for strangers.** The Christmas story is ultimately about making room, opening our hearts to the mystery that is divine love, creating space for God's invitation and identifying areas for God to reside in the unexpected corners of our lives. If we are asked to walk with God, then we can acknowledge this request as being just that, *a request*. There is no coercion with our God, but the ask can be persistent and patiently so.

In the painting of the Annunciation by Artemisia Gentileschi, the archangel is presented as a woman in flowing saffron fabric that is all the more accentuated by the darkness of the work. Mary bows towards the angel and

cherubim faces are in the sky with a shaft of light illuminating the figures in the foreground. What we have here is a new kind of encounter. God opts for a human womb, not a celestial meteor shower or a spaceship, or arrival on horseback through the skies, or through any other means. God chooses the form of a baby to be the centre of light, and hope, and truth, and freedom.

And because of this we see that the gift of Christmas is the gift of *being held* because God understands our form, and the vulnerability and exposure of what it means to be human. God understands that our dignity becomes fragile in the encounters with our world in which we are placed. And God urges us *to remember* that our divine creator gets our gets the body. God gets *it*, God gets *our body*, and our bodies and our journeys with them.

We know that later in the Christmas story that Mary has to travel while pregnant. Her body weary and worn, she finds herself entering labour with no place to stay. **Ra-ta-ta-tat; ra-ta-ta-tat'; there isn't any room, and you can't stay here.** I wonder how often we say that to God. No, not

here, not now, and you *certainly can't show up like that, God*. The truth is that we have a patiently persistent God. How else can we explain the mystery of God taking on human body and life, and choosing to step into our world so that we could know more of the nature of the divine and of divine love.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary". And I believe that those words still hold true. We are asked not to be afraid, because the world isn't as it should be, but God is still asking for us to give God room to bring something new into being, to allow something new to be born, to allow divine love to transform us, and to allow that same divine love through us to revolutionise the world.

**Ra-ta-ta-tat; ra-ta-ta-tat'; there isn't any room, and you can't stay here.** *But I love you, God says, and I am asking for that home with you, because you are worthy of my consideration and attention, because matter so much to me, God says.*

The incarnation reveals to us the holy desire to see things from our perspective, *from our human perspective*, to walk and breathe and live as we do, boundaried by

time. All this, *all this*, so we could have a deeper understanding of the boundlessness of God and the expanse of human potential, and the expanse of the possibility, and possibilities, into which we are called.

**Amen.**