



St James's
Church
Piccadilly

25 December 2021 Christmas Day Sermon
The Revd Dr Mariama Ifode-Blease
'Christmas: it's got to be perfect'

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

As it is Christmas, I thought that
some congregational participation
in the sermon would be the most
appropriate way to celebrate the
birth of Jesus.

When you hear the question: *But
isn't that what Christmas is all
about?*

Would you please respond: It's got
to be, perfect

**Congregation sings: It's got to
be, perfect**

Christmas comes with great
expectations, and it's all set up for
us with the story of the Christ child
who, as we heard in Luke was
born into humble beginnings, and
with no social media following. His
birth was recognised and
celebrated not only by his parents

but by the shepherds, which
probably made the little one feel
right at home. His ancestor, David,
we recall, was also a shepherd
boy.

The problem with the Christmas
story, however, is that everything
just seems to be so perfect. *But
isn't that what Christmas is all
about?*

**Congregation sings: It's got to
be, perfect**

Well yes, we are talking of the son
of God after all. So, when we hear
the words in Isaiah 52 speaking
about the messenger who brings
good news

we have come to associate this
passage with Jesus. Perhaps it is
the unbridled joy, the limitless
peace and the promise of being
saved from ourselves that allows
us to make this association so
easily. As Christians we claim that

Jesus brings liberation and truth and hope to an exhausted and frightening and frightened world.

Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,

together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the Lord to Zion.

Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his
people,

he has redeemed Jerusalem
(Isaiah 52: 8-9).

So you see, the messenger has been painted as perfection embodied, because the feet are beautiful, the news is rich, and the arrival long overdue. *But isn't that what Christmas is all about?*

Congregation sings: It's got to be, perfect

Well, yes, we recognise the joy in this passage from Isaiah, the elation of the people who had suffered the Babylonian exile, because that suffering was now coming to an end. They were being called back to Jerusalem. Yet as one scholar writes "this joy does not ignore the historical context. The singing arises out of great anxiety — a battle has been

engaged, death is confronted. Today, we as well are keenly aware of the "battles" around us, the many places of death that the celebration of Christmas Day does not do away with. In fact, as we enter the twelve days of Christmas we are immediately reminded of death on the day after Christmas and the martyrdom of Stephen and then, a few days, the remembrance of the Holy Innocents, the murder of children. It is in the midst of death that a song arises, rejoicing in a promise".¹

Yet, in the reading from Luke 2, we see something of this theme of perfection continued. The perfect timing of the birth, the perfect delivery, the accommodation provided for, albeit at the last minute, the perfectly obedient shepherds, the heavenly chorus. We are presented each year with a near-perfect scene. And, of course, let us not forget the gifts from kings, who we know will soon arrive. *But isn't that what Christmas is all about?*

1

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/christmas-day-nativity-of-our-lord-iii/commentary-on-isaiah-527-10>

Congregation sings: It's got to be, perfect

Well, no, actually. There are some hiccups: the baby is born in a manger and not in a palace or posh hospital wing. Mary does not have a dedicated midwife and nursing team, and Joseph, well I am not entirely sure what Joseph is thinking at this point. Did he really have to cut the umbilical cord of this child who was and wasn't is? And while the shepherds were certainly obedient what, pray tell, happened to the flocks they were watching by night? Did they abandon their sheep to come and worship the baby who would become the Good Shepherd? Or were the sheep outside huddled around the manger finally glad to be resting once more after this unexpected and epic pilgrimage? So, if you *ignore all these questions and issues*, we are presented each year with a near-perfect scene. *But isn't that what Christmas is all about?*

Congregation sings: It's got to be, perfect

Well, no, actually. The truth is that we add this veneer of perfection to the Christmas story because perfection is what we sometimes want and what we are asked by

society to want for our own lives. We are judged, and judge ourselves and others, against a framework of perfection that is often binary; a framework that was never created for us nor was it created by us. The presents have to be perfect. The decoration, table, Christmas meal also have to be perfect, family and friends have to be perfectly behaved because, I mean, *for God's sake*, no one wants to be the one that ruins Christmas for everybody else.

Of course, some professions and roles require perfection or near-perfection to ensure lives are protected and saved. No one wants an imperfect rescue attempt from a tornado, forest fire, or volcanic eruption. No one wants an imperfect heart operation or knee replacement. Perfection has a place, but it is not the place for us to rest all of who we are, in heart and body and soul.

In John Agard's wickedly irreverent poem 'Get Down Ye Angels'² he asks the angels to come down from their lofty heights and "inhabit the splendid risk of flesh and bone". That is just it, isn't it? We inhabit the splendid

²

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2021/mar/22/poem-of-the-week-get-down-ye-angels-by-john-agard>

risk of flesh and bone, which means that self-fought for and self-argued perfection are not our home. *Our home is love.* Our home is in the love made perfect through our imperfections, and in us recognising that God is not asking us to be perfect. God in Jesus Christ, in the embodiment of love, is asking whether we can allow ourselves to be loved.

This Christmas, I pray that we enter the unmasked Christmas story and that we find our place between Joseph, the perplexed partner, Mary, the terrified young and poor mother and the recklessly obedient shepherds. And here between the hay and heaven, between your seat and this table, let us lay out all our imperfections before the manger, before a God who loves us fiercely, and who sings and rejoices in our imperfections made perfect through divine grace, and in death-defying love.

Amen.