

Christmas Day, 2009

The first morning

Imagine. The sun had not even risen and the girl had only had a couple of hours sleep before the strange unfamiliar demanding noise woke her. Tired and aching though she was that sound, the sound of a hungry new-born baby demanding food made her instantly get up to comfort and feed it. This tiny baby, so vulnerable, so totally dependent upon her awoke in her feelings of love stronger than she had ever known before.

This scene is repeated every day in every town and every country. It could be a description of your mother when you were born, or Mary with the baby Jesus. It is the natural, though sadly not quite universal, response of a mother to a new-born baby.

Jesus' birth

On this day, this special day, we remember Jesus' birth, his humanity. That first morning, before the shepherds had visited, long before the wise men came, Mary and Joseph like any other new parents were marvelling over this tiny miracle, with ten perfect fingers and ten perfect toes. I wonder whether the first visitor was the inn keeper's wife or some other neighbour, checking to see whether they were all right. An ordinary visit made to see the baby. Because for those nearby, this was an ordinary baby. No visible haloes, no radiant glow, to all appearances just another baby, infinitely special to the parents, but unremarkable to outsiders.

No ordinary baby

Yet this ordinary baby was the word of God, existing before time and beyond time, there in all creation, the true light that enlightens every man. At this one point 2000 years ago, God became man.

2000 years ago seems such a long time. The length of time makes us blend history with myths and legends. Strange things could happen way back in the past, but somehow seem to lose their sense of reality now. It seems slightly less time and therefore more manageable if you think of it in terms of generations - perhaps 75 generations. Either way a very short time in relation to the time this planet has been around and a mere flash in relation to eternity.

Yet the mystery is inescapable. We have this account in Luke's gospel of the birth of Christ with angels bringing the message to the shepherds – a mix of the mundane and the totally extraordinary.

An ordinary baby, every ordinary baby, changes its parents. They are taught by the small demanding infant the discipline of selfless love. Of course, there are a few that refuse to accept this responsibility, but most of us are to some extent changed.

The transforming power of Jesus

But this extra-ordinary baby whose birth we celebrate today changed not just his parents but all people. God became man in order to transform us, that we too might learn the power of selfless love.

This tiny baby, so dependent, so fragile, is the light that enlightens every man. He is joy, he is faith, he is hope, he is love, wherever and in whoever they occur. For as St John's Gospel says, he is the light enlightens every man. Not just church goers, not just Christians, not just good people. Jesus is for everybody.

A baby's smile

If you are a parent, do you remember your child's first smiles. How suddenly it didn't matter if he or she had been grizzling all night long, or that you were more tired than you would have believed possible. You were forced by that smile to respond with joy and love. It is totally irresistible. The smile brings a response to the pure beauty of another human being. That is like the transforming nature of the Christmas message, but not just limited to your own child, but to all the children of God.

Go to find the baby

As the shepherd's said, 'Let us go then even unto Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened'. A baby that is not your baby or my baby, and yet is in some way everyone's baby. A baby that is totally human, totally defenceless and vulnerable, and yet is also all powerful God. A baby that we can take into our hearts and love by loving all those who were created with us. A baby whose smile can show us the light that is in everyman. For the world is full of light and beauty, though the world doesn't see it. Let's stretch out our hands to this baby. Let our fingers be clasped by the small curling baby fingers. For this baby too grows up.

This baby, so exposed and vulnerable, born in terrible conditions, will become the man who was rejected, reviled, crucified. This baby is also God, stripped of all power, open to the extremes of human love and pain and passion. This baby is God offering all that he is to us in love.

Not just that once, in a place and a time far away, but today. This baby can transform us, if we stay him as he grows up we too will learn to love as he loves, to reach out to the poor, those who are despised, rejected, unloved. We too can learn to be bringers of peace and justice.

So if, as you listen to the carols in this service, you become aware of that sense of expectation in the air, and respond with an unusual joy, or perhaps an uncharacteristic tear, do not dismiss these feelings as simply an escape into sentimentality, or perhaps a nostalgia for a childhood lost. It could be that you are responding to something deeper, an echo of this great mystery of the birth of God's son?

For the angels are still here, even if we cannot see them. That love is here for us this day.

We are called to come, and with the shepherds and the millions who came after them, called to kneel at the altar to receive the love of God in the form of his body or through his spirit as a blessing. For God is offering us himself.

Come. Receive.

And may you and your family have a blessed and wonderful Christmas. Amen.