

The Intimacy of Christmas Day

Isaiah 52.7-10

Hebrews 1.1-4

John 1.1-14

Happy Christmas! We find ourselves once more before the intimate and familiar scene of the baby Jesus born in the manger.

The familiar intimacy of this story has echoed in our church services throughout the Advent and Christmas season as well-known carols are sung; lessons about shepherds, angels and the people of God are read aloud; candles are lit; and cribs blessed.

Today is the high point of a season that celebrates intimate humanity with its many domestic scenes: Friends and family reunited; children impatient while adults slumber; longstanding traditions concerning trees, films, and recipes dusted off and rejigged; the newest tiniest member of a family held in the arms of its eldest; home-cooked meals, impassioned conversations, presents, wrapping paper, laughter, glasses clinking.

One of the joys of Christmas is how we give creative expression to its traditions and stories in our homes with our loved ones. Another joy of Christmas is that in these personal ways of crafting our celebration we join others across this country and the world. We connect to something bigger than ourselves, something not simply of our own making, but rather which remakes us into a Christmas people.

No less intimate than these signs of festivity in home and church are the tears and heartbreak at absences felt all the more poignantly; or, at devastating personal tragedy. Tomorrow's worries loom large. Our consciences are uneasy about those who are forgotten and marginalised; about a world creaking under the strain of so many countervailing forces. The struggle with these things is also deeply personal and requires all our inventiveness, especially in our homes. Again we are not alone in this. In the church services, we are reminded of our shared struggles by a discordant note in a carol, a piercing lyric, an aching phrase of scripture.

Today, into the familiar intimacy of these our Christmas joys and sorrows, dawns the mysterious light and majesty of the words of John's Gospel. From within the intimacy of our lives, before the threshold of the intimacy of the manger, and within the depths of our hearts, reverberate words of everlasting portent:

In the beginning was the Word.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us.

These words too are familiar and intimate to us, but they take us much further, deeper and higher into the intimacy of Christmas.

How in the crib, heaven touches earth.

On Christmas day, we are invited to step into a deeper intimacy at the heart of our being that beats at the heart of our world.

All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.

We are called to be refreshed in the wonder at the astonishing fact that anything exists at all. We are beckoned to see how what is most intimate opens up to what is most universal. We are transported into the life of the God who is 'more intimate to us than we are to ourselves' (St Augustine). We are alerted to how everything is, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it, 'charged with the grandeur of God.' How there is 'the dearest freshness deep down things.'

To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God...

On Christmas day, we are beckoned to become like children and open our hearts to the splendour of all that exists in the intimacy of our lives, in those we love and in the face of the stranger and the needy. Becoming children of God, however, is not something we simply invent ourselves.

Here the crib is a window in the ways of eternity. God's message of love comes first to those whose lives connect them deeply to the earth and open them to heaven: Mary and Joseph; the shepherds tending their flocks. God reveals his glory first to those who are poor

in spirit; who are childlike in responsive wonder and perplexity. In the crib, God comes to us from within the splendour and poverty of our own existence with all the vigour and fragility of a newborn baby that instils wonder. At the heart of Christmas, lies an event that every human being can recognise.

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

A baby articulates this like no one else, even though they have no words. This explains the depth of communication that often takes place between a baby and someone who is elderly, frail or vulnerable. They speak the same language of life in the midst of vulnerability.

The Christmas day crib sings of how the very serious work of salvation, which is God's work, is a kind of wholehearted and deeply intimate child's play. As one theologian puts it (Hans Urs von Balthasar), this reminds Christians not to simply 'parade the cross', or for that matter, scripture, but to attend to the most obvious of matters: the intimate gift of existence as received from others and shared with childlike abandon. Christians as a Christmas people should 'fly the banner of childhood' in a world beset by all too adult anxieties, fears and violence. We should remember that the One who works our salvation in Gethsemane, on the Cross and Easter morning is always the child of the God he calls Abba, Father.

Perhaps this spirit of childhood explains why Christmas speaks to so many people and escapes our churches and leaps out of the pages of the bible into our homes, shops, streets. This is not just down to successful advertising and commercialisation, however much these play a part. Beyond this, in a way that cannot be overcome by any darkness, but is recognisable to all who have been and are children, Christmas shows us God's transformative way of celebrating the wonder and joy of all that is intimately and most fully human.

Amen