

## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Christmas Day

readings: [Isaiah 52.7-10](#), [Hebrews 1.1-4](#), [John 1.1-14](#)

25 December 2023

The word became flesh, and lived among us -

Christmas is a great mystery – but not always a holy mystery. I'm thinking of the Christmas card that arrives from Cathy and Dennis – you know – Cathy and Dennis. Which Cathy is that? Which Dennis?

The note inside 'Hope to see you in 2024' Doesn't really help.

There are other mysteries too. Like this jar. It came with a nice bottle in one of those posted boxes, stuffed with hay, useful for the crib of course. What is it? Carciofini – what on earth is that? It looks like snails..... but no, with a little help from Google I learn what I have is globe artichokes, It goes on to explain these are form of edible thistle. I'm not sure whether to be encouraged by that.

With this great Mystery of Christmas, there are things we know, and the surprising things we have still to learn.

What do we know? What have we still to discover?

The things we know about Christmas: let me guess what those things are for you...

- It's a joyful celebration of the birth of a child. Always a big event - a life changing one for mum – for parents and siblings. Tears and laughter are common. Exhaustion. Even when things haven't gone as you expected or as you'd hoped, the arrival of the baby is an extraordinary time. there's a lot of emotion around. A sense of wonder, and an overwhelming joy. But you know that already. We all do.
- Christmas - It's a great time to get together and celebrate. Balloons. Holly. (not a great combination) Festive fun – but you know all about that. We all do.
- It's also a time we know we should think of people who don't get to join in the party – those spending this time on their own or in hospital, in care, in prison, or hard at work - those serving in the armed forces, or those on duty in the emergency services.

Yes, it's a time people think of others.

But you know that. We all do.

- Christmas – it's the message of the angels - Good News for all humankind, peace on earth. The birth of Jesus, Son of David, to bring light, confidence and hope to a world whose currency these days is generally darkness, anxiety and despair. But we know that – even if it's a message we find hard to receive.
- A time for giving gifts – for responding to charity appeals. But we all know this – and try to be generous.
- What we all know about Christmas already is that by and large, it encourages us to look for better things in the world into which Christ was born.

For good news in a world of bad news.

Friendship instead of fighting;

Bridges rather than walls. Reconciliation, not revenge.

The Restoration, not the destruction of our planet.

Somehow coming to Derby Cathedral today to celebrate the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem more than 2000 years ago, you are saying, we are all saying, this actually matters. It matters so much.

In the words of Christina Rossetti, Love came down at Christmas, love all lovely, love divine.

Not just wishful thinking, but real. Changing everything. Even changing us.

But – and this is where I have been heading - that change won't happen unless we make space for the things we don't yet know. The mystery that goes on surprising us.

The uncharted ground. The 'grace and truth' that has been given, but which we have not yet recognised, received or acted upon.

For me there are two surprising mysteries this time. The first is so obvious it's easy to miss. That Jesus comes to us as an infant, alerts us to the infinite value and significance of every child. Look out for the children, look out for the young – because in them lies the hope of the world.

And think of all those children we are not attending to - children living in poverty or in conflict or at risk today.

To today's children and young people here in Derbyshire and round the world – we need to hear young voices, hear their cries, their hopes, their dreams, their aspirations.

And be led by them. My young friends need you to lead us by the light of the Christ Child. He is one of us – but especially he is one of you.

If a light is to shine in the darkness, and no darkness ever put it out, then it is the children of today who will carry that light into tomorrow. Let their song ring out with that of the angels – peace on earth, and goodwill amongst all people. It is time for our society to invest in its children and young people – it is time for the church to do the same. They don't necessarily need a good talking to – but they may well want a good listening to.

But now for my other, my second easily unnoticed mystery.

Of all the perplexing mysteries of Christmas, in both our Bible readings today, perhaps the most astonishing is the assertion that Jesus came down from heaven. Not just that he was born at Bethlehem, but that Jesus was always with the Father – as the Word of God, active in the creation of all things.

That even now Jesus sustains all things with his mighty word. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. All things came into being through Him. In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. What do we do with this mystery? The 'Word' in John's Gospel means the sense of all things, the ultimate articulation of meaning, of consciousness, of truth, of reality. You don't get more real than this.

It is towards this Word that all science and learning aspires. You could even say this was what artificial intelligence is striving after.

And yet AI could never match this.

Because this Word, this supreme intelligence, this Word of God, became flesh in the baby in Bethlehem, and entered not just an isolated human being, but embraced humanity, community, belonging, relationship. Truth, reality, love, embodied for us, with us, from the cradle to the cross. Jesus, God with us always, bearing the scars, making sense of it all through love. Through the thick and thin of being born, living and dying. Embracing life in all its fullness. For ever.

St Luke tells us of Mary, mother of Jesus, that after the birth of her Son, she treasured these words – the words of the song of the angels as reported by the shepherds - and pondered them in her heart.

We do well to treasure and to ponder these words, the stories told by Matthew and Luke, the witness of John – that here is a light that no darkness can ever put out. (John 1.5)

The witness of Hebrews – that here in this Jesus is the one who sustains all things. (Hebrews 1.3)

The witness of St Paul, who tells us that God was in Christ reconciling all things to himself. (2. Corinthians 5.19) and – that in Christ all things hold together – in Christ it all fits, that despite any appearances to the contrary, it all makes sense. (Colossians 1.17)

Paul tells us, He made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, born in human likeness, was obedient all the way to death, death on a cross. At his name every knee should bow in worship – with shepherds and the wise men and women young and old of every time and place. (Philippians 2.6-11)

This is our hope even in the darkest of times. This child is love, God's greatest gift of all.

O holy child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray

Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us, today.

Amen.

**The Right Revd Malcolm Macnaughton,  
Bishop of Repton.**