

Sermon for 24th December 2024, Year C, Midnight Mass

Preached at St Serf's Shettleston

John 1:1-14

Sermon

This reading from the beginning of John's gospel is probably the most famous in the whole Christian bible, because it speaks about the greatest mystery of them all – the idea that God, the creator of all things, at one point in history chose to be born as a human being, as a baby called Jesus.

Unlike the other three gospels from Matthew, Mark and Luke, who focus on Jesus's humanity and his closeness to God, John's gospel insists that this little baby Jesus in a manger was with God before the universe was created and took an active part in that creation. And then he drops the bombshell that he believes Jesus is in fact God himself, come to show us the way out of the great mess of cruelty, selfishness and violence that we so often find ourselves in.

It's not that belief in *God* is hard to accept. But the idea that this supernatural God became human and came into the world in a specific place at a specific time, to bring unconditional love back into our hearts, to show us a better way – this is much harder to comprehend.

Some religions find it deeply offensive that a glorious transcendent God might become a little child. Not all Christians go along with it either. It took around 300 years before the Church finally concluded that Jesus Christ and God were somehow the same.

I wonder what we all think, today, in the twenty-first century, about Jesus? I suspect it probably isn't so much different to the characters in the Christmas story. The shepherds are shocked by an encounter with angels. They go to the stable in awe, caught up in something they don't understand but somehow feel an attraction to. There's something beautiful there, and perhaps they wish their entire lives were full of it, but they can't put their finger on what it is.

The wise men too, come seeking something uncertain. They recognise the signs in the heavens, but are they surprised by what they find? They go first to Herod's

palace and must feel rather overdressed when they finally follow the star to the stable with their expensive gifts. We focus on the presents they brought – the gold, frankincense and myrrh – but I always wonder what they took away with them when they travelled home to the east. Were they changed by the experience? What did they talk about on the long camel ride home?

We too, come to the manger, confused and uncertain. We listen to the readings in reverential awe. We look at the strange building around us, built brick by brick by people of another generation, and we wonder what it is that inspired such passion and commitment.

There's something here, something that's not just nostalgia for our own childhood, something that is still alive in our own hearts today, something, perhaps, still waiting to be born in our own lives.

There seems to be something in the idea of a God of love becoming a human child that triggers a sort of longing in us. It seems implausible, ridiculous even, but what if it's *true*?

Suddenly we would have a God who, despite being the creator and sustainer of all things, is humble enough to be a human child, who gets told off by his parents, who gets treated pretty badly by his own community, and who eventually is put to death by the authorities because they're afraid he might take worldly power from them. Through none of this does he ever choose to dominate anyone, to control or coerce anyone, to force anyone to follow rules from which he himself is exempt. Instead, he loves and cares for those that his society considers outsiders and unimportant – the poor, the disabled, the sick, the mentally ill, widows, orphans, foreigners, everyone who has been excluded and told that they are not worthy of belonging.

Suddenly we have a God who does not sit impassively on a Throne from afar, only judging us at the end of our lives, but a God who walks alongside us, suffers as we suffer, rejoices as we rejoice; a God who comes to our weddings, our baptisms and our funerals, drinks in the pub, laughs at the rubbish Christmas Cracker jokes, serves at the food bank and the soup kitchen, although actually I suspect he is more likely to be found waiting in line with the others sleeping rough.

Suddenly we have God who not only seeks out those on the margins, but actually is one of those on the margins, rejected by most of the human race he created.

If Jesus is, in fact, God, then we have a God who really does call people by name, who knows us better than we know ourselves, and who finds us worthy of love, without condition, just because he made us. And that unconditional love, which we all long for, this is what the child in the manger represents, and this is who he is, and this is what he promises, not just that we belong, but that we can become people who offer that welcome and acceptance and affirmation to one another.

Sometimes we are the shepherds in confusion and awe; sometimes we are the wise men following a star to who knows what; sometimes we're Joseph, holding things together but not sure who all these extra guests are; sometimes we're Mary, who said yes to God's request and was faithful and feisty at the beginning and the end; and sometimes we're the donkey, stubborn and dependable. But sometimes we might even be the baby Jesus, because we too are called to be children of God.

This light continues to shine in the darkness, and the darkness, even today, has not overcome it. May that light which has drawn us to the manger, watching and wondering, fill our hearts and minds with that love which transforms us, so that we too might live our lives full of grace and truth. Amen.