

Tuesday 25 December 2007: Christmas Day

A Child is Born for Us

Readings: Isaiah 52, 7-10; Luke 2. 1-20

Nine years ago this Christmas I remember waiting for my nephew George to be born. His mother, who is a midwife, had got everything ready for the perfect home delivery. She wanted more than anything this birth to take place naturally, in her own bedroom, with warm baths, soft music, those she loved around her and a midwife who would not advocate medical intervention and epidurals at the first sign of labour. She said that she wanted to experience the birth as part of her rather than something that was done to her as it had seemed in hospital. But about a week before the birth she went for a scan and discovered that the baby was turned the wrong way round and was breach and she would have to go into hospital after all. She was completely distraught. She had invested so much of herself in planning to give birth in the way she believed. When I reached the house my brother met me in the hall and the tensions were obvious. "Look you're a bloody priest can't you do something? I mean go and pray with her or something. I tell you what if you can turn that baby around I will go to Church every week for the rest of my life!" So I went and prayed with her and asked God to bless her and be present and that both the baby and his mother would be safe and the baby born in the best possible way. And my sister-in-law cried.

The next day my brother phoned : "You'll never believe this but the baby's turned round and is all set for a normal delivery. But you only get thirty three percent of the credit because as well as you we also had a hypnotist who cost a fortune, and an acupuncturist/aroma-therapist who put incense sticks between her toes. So we are not quite sure which one of you turned the baby round, but personally I think the baby just decided to turn by himself because he was getting fed up with all the fuss." Personally I thought this was a bit of an excuse to avoid having to fulfil his promise to go to Church every week for the rest of his life!

The question of who was responsible for turning the baby, however, was very soon forgotten when George was born into the world at home, reported down the phone by his devoted older brother, Joe. There is something about a baby that simply changes everything. Wow! Birth is incredible. Before there was one less person and now suddenly a new life has burst into the house and things will never be the same again. Another of my sister-in-laws, after giving birth to her first son, explained to me that the first few weeks were both amazing and terrifying. She told me "Suddenly you have this baby, this beautiful life and in your arms and it's totally dependent on you for absolutely everything and it's the most massive responsibility you have ever had and you suddenly realise you really have got to learn everything from scratch and immediately and the responsibility is going to be yours for at least eighteen years. And then of course you begin to realise that your own body and instincts are teaching you and that you are responding from within you not from the head but from this fierce protective love that is at your very core."

A baby is so absolutely miraculous in so many ways – I think all of us have felt that when we've seen those tiny finger nails, minute nose, and glazed eyes looking up from the bundle thrust into our hands. Never mind the immaculate conception all births are completely miraculous conceptions and what is more this particular miracle is the most inclusive miracle of them all for every one of us when we were born have been there and done this. Of course right from the beginning it's easier for some than for others but the gift of life in whatever circumstance can still take your breath away: a breathing, responding, communicating sign of the mystery of creation with all its hopes, fears challenges and unknowns.

We come back to the Christmas story of Jesus' birth time and time again. I think it is because this is the story of life which belongs to each one of us. This story speaks the language of all humanity and also the language of God. In the words of the carol 'the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.' The child is a sign both of all that is possible and also all that is most vulnerable. God communicates with us not with arguments, or debates, or theological treaties: God speaks to us most directly in a tiny human life and the cries of a powerless baby. Lancelot Andrews in his Christmas Day sermon of 1620 described the incarnation of Christ as "The Word that cannot speak" - the phrase draws attention to powerlessness of this baby but also the power of this human life to be, to be the most complete expression of God beyond words. Throughout Advent our theme has been reading the signs, the signs of our times, the signs of God in the creation: in the scriptures we have seen God revealed in a burning bush, in revelations, in laws, in miracles, in journeys, in wars, victories, defeats, and disasters - through the voice of the prophets, through dreams and visions and with John the Baptist in the water of baptism but of course this child of Bethlehem is the most powerful sign of them all. Rowan Williams writes: "In a world of competition, frenzied chatter, control obsession, there is a terrible aptness in a God who speaks in a child's cry. And it is so cruelly hard for believer and unbeliever alike to face the possibility that silence, stumbling, the apparent crudity of this stable birth tell you far more about God than the languages of would be adult sophistication".

And so each Christmas we are called to enter the stable door again. To try and let our eyes grow accustomed to the darkness and to gaze upon, with the others who have also come to witness, the miracle of this baby born for our salvation. What is it that we see in this child? We see a child as we have seen in any child and in fact one another - if only we could realise it - a child both totally human and also totally of God. We see a child totally powerless and yet with the power to bring kings to their knees and whose story will be told by all generations. We see one whose poverty is total. Naked he is born into the world and naked he will die yet we also see the one whose riches and life are greater than anything that can be conceived. God held in the arms of humanity. God entrusting the life of God into our care. In the words of my sister-in-law: "the responsibility is both terrifying and amazing." You know that things will never be the same again and that this immaculate beautiful, vulnerable life of God depends upon us. It is a life which humbles you, brings you with the shepherds to your knees and makes you pray from the depths of your heart, Oh God give me the strength to be worthy of this and if I am not at least to cope with it. And we hear the voice of those messengers in response 'Do not be afraid for see I am bringing you news of great joy for you and for all people.'

We know this child from the way those around the child respond. There is an amazing sense of generosity and joy about all of this. It could have been portrayed as a catalogue of disasters but the light and life which has come into the world has filled this stable with blessing so that each one of us who gaze on this Christ child, despite the difficulties, can be lit up, like Rembrandt's *Nativity*, by his divine glow. Right from the beginning this is inclusive Church for the only ones excluded from the stable are those who exclude themselves: the mother, Mary as we have seen in so many pictures pressing the Christ to her cheek supporting the one whose love supports her, breathing the same breath, holding and held, we see in her the courage and struggle of love and a God calling us into the risk of relationship; and then Joseph - listening to the voice of God in obedience and devotion, a voice which has filtered even into his dreams and filled him with a love and care for both wife and child even though the child is not his own; and the shepherds running from the fields who have filled by the news of this birth with joy, peace on earth and good will for all people. This child's birth has for the moment dissolved the division between the mortal and the immortal, gone are the

prejudices, and the massive and nonsensical dividing walls we build. Here is humanity drawn to a child like a magnet - even the stable animals joining the witnesses as part of the family of creation. Later we will see wise travellers from other nations who have read the signs and come to worship. And this child in the midst, the smallest, the most seemingly unable to change and transform anything or anyone, by his very being brings us here into the presence God's life.

A few months ago George whose birth I described at the beginning of this address, now aged eight, out of the blue said to his father: "I want to go to Church why don't we ever to Church?" "Well that's a turn up for the books," his father said, "what makes you suddenly want to go to Church?" George explained "At school we sing this song about God - *He's got the whole world in his hands* - I really like that song, that's why I want to go to Church because he's got the whole world in his hands."

George has a point... 'out of the mouths of babes...!' It seems a very good reason for going to Church. Here at this stable - the miracle of a small child held by his mother, held by all of us - somehow does seem to have the whole world in his hands. As though we have touched and been held by God and know what we long for. Bishop John V Taylor wrote

The Lord says:

Let not my humble presence affront and stumble
your hardened hearts that have not known my ways
nor seen my tracks converge on this uniqueness.
Mine is the strength of the hills that endure and crumble,
bleeding slow fertile dust to the valley floor.
I am the fire in the leaf that crisps and falls
and rots into the roots of the rioting trees.
I am the mystery, rising surfacing
out of the seas into these infant eyes
that offer openness only and the unfocusing
search for an answering grace. O recognise,
I am the undefeated heart of weakness.
Kneel to adore, fall down to pour your praise:
You cannot lie so low as I have been always.