

St George's Anglican Church Malvern
Christmas 2008

I once heard about a gifted therapist who works with autistic children. Autism is the kind of affliction that seems to cut people off from ordinary communication. I have a friend with an autistic child. Perhaps you know someone who suffers from this or you know a family struggling to do their best for an autistic member. Autism shows itself in repetitive behaviours that make sense, if they do at all, only to the person doing them. Sometimes autistic people bang their heads against a wall or make odd noises, over and over and over. The gifted therapist I heard about begins by simply doing whatever the autistic person does. It might take days but gradually the autistic person will connect. There is a smile or some other sign that a connection has begun. A relationship has been initiated. Autism seems to happen when the brain can't cope with the world the way it is and a person just shuts down and won't let anyone in. This particular therapist makes connection by doing what the 'locked up in themselves' person does. The fear and isolation of the autistic person finds an echo in the therapist – and a relationship begins.

That is a powerful image of what God does for us in the birth of Jesus. We humans are wrapped up in ourselves. We all have a kind of autism about how to live well together. We know that so many of the ways people relate are as purposeless and as harmful as banging your head repeatedly against a wall. It is a great mystery that every generation keeps repeating the same greedy, destructive, addictive behaviours. These behaviours lead to wars and all sorts of violence; cause husbands and wives to betray the precious gift of trust; ruin lives and rob children of love; they alienate sisters and brothers; they wreak havoc within countries and cause suspicion between them. The noisy atheists of our time offer no explanation why each generation keeps repeating the same harmful patterns, any more than they can explain why there is love and goodness. They have no solution, no remedy as does the Christian faith.

This emotional, moral, spiritual autism is the great betrayal of our humanity- by our own doing - that the Christian faith calls 'sin.' When it comes to loving one another we all have at least a touch of 'autism'. God seeks to remedy our situation in the same way that gifted therapist connects with the people in his care – by doing what we do. God comes to us as one of us, born to a human mother. Jesus grows up in a human family, he works, he sleeps, and he eats, he laughs and loves. He is betrayed and heart broken. He responds to our actions and our words. He echoes and mirrors to us what we are like and then shows us a better way. In truth, not only shows us a better way but becomes that better way for us. And when he begins to do new, even shocking things – to proclaim God's inclusive love made real around a meal table, to heal and to forgive - to die and to rise again – we need not panic or reject him - for we can learn that we can trust him, this Jesus who knows us from the inside out and has connected with us and connected us to God to remedy our human condition.

Christmas is like an overture to God's great love affair with humanity. In the Christmas story we see all the *beginnings* of the greater story to follow. We see the vulnerability of the adult Jesus in his birth as a tiny baby. He is swaddled in the manger just as he will be wrapped in linen cloths for his hasty burial following an unjust death. In the angel's song we hear of the peace Jesus makes possible between heaven and earth, between God and humanity. We glimpse the 'rag-bag' collection of

despised outsiders Jesus will later welcome around his table when we see the rough shepherds rush to his cradle. We begin to realise that he will speak with a wisdom only the foolish will ignore when we see the wise men visit, those sages who left all that was familiar to find him. We grasp the threat he will pose to the existing world order in King Herod's killing of all the boys under two in the hope of disposing of Jesus. And we feel a mother's anxiety of her child's life; indeed we see the shadow of the cross, when we see the baby presented with myrrh used to anoint the dead.

God wants to connect with us through the real stuff of life. When we are real before God, no longer pretending we are fine the way we are, the remedy can begin to take effect. Christmas brings us up close to the real, raw stuff of life. We look around the Christmas dinner table and there are those not with us this year – the parents who have died, the children now grown and elsewhere, the friend we have lost touch with. And we look again and see the new faces, the baby who arrived during the year; the relatives who've made the effort to join us, the new person we've welcomed into our circle. I know these will be the realities of your Christmas gatherings, for you and I have shared many of them during the year.

So, if Christmas is the overture, what is the great story? It is the grand story John tells in his fourth gospel – the story of the Word made flesh. The Christian faith makes the bold assertion that *God* comes to us *as one of us*. But how to make sense of this great mystery we call the incarnation, the becoming embodied of God. God speaks to us in the language of our humanity, a humanity God shares completely with us in Jesus. God speaks to us in our suffering, in our struggles and also in our moments of sheer joy and real love. God speaks to us of a holiness that is not put on like an ill-fitting 'religious' overcoat but put on in the wholeness of our being remade as we learn new patterns of loving from the God who has simply come along side us, the way that gifted therapist gets along side those he will help.

In the end, this is the image I invite you to take with you this Christmas – that in Jesus the baby born in Bethlehem, God has come alongside every one of us to so that we may leave behind all that distorts human life and learn from the One who embodies love, and whose coming shines a new light upon the humanity we share with him.

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