

A Sermon preached by the Bishop of Coventry,
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at the Christmas Day Eucharist 2020 in Coventry Cathedral

Introduction

What a year it's been! 'Keep a safe distance from others'.
'Stay at home as much as possible'. Words written in our
places of work, our schools: I even have them on the door of
my house. It's been the message we've needed to hear. The
message we've tried to live by – not so much to keep
ourselves safe but to keep others safe.

And now here we are at Christmas.

At the heart of Christmas is the story of God who didn't keep
a distance, safe in heaven but came to the dangers of earth,
came to be born where animals eat and feed, soon to have to
flee for his life. God didn't stay at home in the top tier of
heaven but came to the lowest tiers of earth to make his
home here, with us.

The Word became flesh

'The Word became flesh and lived among us.'

More literally to the original Greek of the New Testament:

'the Word became flesh and pitched his tent with us.'

Or more colloquially: 'The Word became flesh and blood and
moved into the neighbourhood'

That is a radical claim to be made of God: a philosophy busting, religion shaking, world-view shattering claim. It took the Church some centuries to be absolutely clear about the full meaning of St John's claim and to enshrine it in its creeds.

The intellectual culture in which the church first grew had one basic assumption: that God was so pure, so perfect, so powerful that God needed to keep a safe distance from the world. That God needed to stay at home. That God needed to be protected from the world and the world needed to be protected from God.

If God were to have contact with the world then God would be polluted by the world's impurity – its many viruses, biological and moral. And if the world had contact with God, then the world would be consumed, overwhelmed burnt away by the purity and perfection of the presence of God.

The only way any sort of relationship could be established between God and the world, God and humanity was for God to send some lesser being – a prophet, an angel or some sort of lesser divinity – to make contact remotely at a safe distance from us.

God has come

But the Christian Faith of Christmas breaks through all of this – or rather God smashes human assumptions about who God and how God is and where God can go – and God breaks through from heaven to earth.

The Word, says John, was with God and was God. All things came into being through this Word that is God. This Word is life and light and this Word, God's own Word, becomes flesh and dwelt among us.

'God is with us: Christ is born' as the bass voice echoed around this Cathedral last night when the choir sang the John Taverner anthem rifting the ancient prophecy of Isaiah: 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which St Matthew reminds us, means 'God is with us'.

God has come to us: come to this virus ridden earth: 'bearing our infirmities and carrying our diseases', to quote another prophecy of Isaiah.

God came into our world of sin, 'wounded for our transgressions, crushed by our iniquities' as Isaiah puts it.

God came into our world our violence: 'led like a lamb to the slaughter' as Isaiah foretold.

God came to make his home among us, held within womb of Mary only to be told there was no room at the inn for this child to be born, for God made flesh to be born.

God who came to make his home among us, hounded by Herod, forced to flee to Egypt, a child migrant and refugee.

God who came to make his home among us, who became known as an adult as the Son of man who has nowhere to lay his head.

Decision and challenge

St John gives us the full Christian **doctrine** of Christmas: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us' – among us in the full, dark reality of human life.

But he also gives us the momentous **decision** that Christmas demands of us – the Christian challenge of Christmas. *The crisis of Christmas.*

He (John says) – the Word, God's Word, the Word who is God – was in the world, and the world came into being through him; **yet** *the world did not know him.* He came to what was his own, **and** *his own people did not accept him.*

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

born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

God comes to us to make his home among us but some do not know him, some do not accept him: they make no room for him.

God comes to make his home among us and some receive him, believe in his name – that this child born of Mary bears the name of God. And to them is given power to become children of God.

GK Chesterton wrote a Christmas poem that begins:

There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All can be at home.

This is the invitation of Christmas:

- to come to this child born of Mary, to come like the shepherds, running from where you were to where he is, to see this wonder of which angels sing and to kneel and adore him;
- to come like the magi, perhaps after a long and winding journey taking many months, even years, to find yourself in a strange land yet one where you become overwhelmed with joy.

Chesterton ended his poem in this way:

To an open house in the evening
Home shall all people come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all can be at home.

Conclusion

'Keep a safe distance from others'. 'Stay at home as much as possible'.

I will need to keep those words written on the door of my house for some more months:

But I do not need to say that to God. I can open the door of my heart to God who did not stay at home in heaven but came dwell on earth, to the God who did not keep a distance from me in my world of viruses and violence but came to find me, to save me, to heal me to bring me home into the heart of his love.

There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All can be at home.

To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be ***and that are***,
To the place where God was homeless
And all can be at home.

You may not be able to be at home this Christmas.
You may not be able to have your loved ones with you this
Christmas
But you can be at home with God because God came to us at
Christmas.