

Sermon: Midnight Mass, Christmas 2014

Watching films together is one of the things many of us do at Christmas. I'm looking forward in years to come to sharing some of my favourite films with my children. But I recognise that for some films I'm going to have to wait a few years before such shared viewing would be appropriate. For instance I think that *The Godfather* is a truly great film. But its violence and dark subject matter make it completely unsuitable for family viewing with young children. And it really couldn't be edited to make it suitable. If we tried to edit out the nasty bits it would be both considerably shorter and virtually unintelligible. Most of the plot would be lost; just how would you depict the descent of Michael from idealistic and independent war hero to corrupted mafia don and maintain a Universal certificate?

The Christmas story which we have heard again from St Luke's Gospel tonight is one which we regularly edit and sanitise into a form which is in some senses 'suitable for all'. This is not the first service today in which we have remembered Christ's birth. At our crib service this afternoon we also remembered his birth in a way that was appropriate for the children who attended.

And it is good that we tell our children this story. But we should not kid ourselves that the cosy version of events is really 'suitable for all'. If we stop with the sanitised narrative of Christmas the birth of Jesus becomes a nice fairy tale and is stripped of much of its significance. And since this is the one sermon in the year I can preach after the watershed I would like to use it to consider aspects of the Christmas story which require a somewhat higher age certificate.

The Christmas narrative we tell often obscures that our Lord's birth was a real human birth. Depicting labour is certainly something which is missed from our sanitised version. Luke tells us simply that '*While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth...*' The impression is given that the actual birth bit was so ordinary and straight forward that the womb of Mary merely opened and delivered Jesus perfectly clean and ready to be wrapped in bands of cloth. No fuss. No pain. No grimaces. No blood.

But for Jesus to be born Mary had to give birth. There would have been blood and mucus and all the rest of the messy business of human birth. By missing out the labour and birth in our minds, or skipping rapidly over it, we have a baby that just appears. While that sounds very much like a divine baby it doesn't sound much like any human one. But Jesus is both divine and human. Tonight we can utter seemingly impossible words: 'on this night, God was born' 'on this night, God entered into the messy reality of being human.'

And this birth is occurring in an animal shed. The fundamental nature of such places is that they are a place for animals. And as such they are a place of and defined by shit. And it really is shit on the floor of that stable. Maybe its 'poo' or 'faeces' if we're trying politely to avoid saying that word, or maybe we don't think about it at all. But we shouldn't attempt to sanitise the unsanitary. The shit is important. Our Lord is born in the worst of places and in doing so shows incredible solidarity with people who also find themselves in places which are dark and despairing.

And the world we live in is often dark and despairing. Our world is one where children are shot to make a political point, where many are hungry this Christmas, where individuals and governments seem powerless against the storms of economic forces which threaten to swamp them. Similarly our lives can be dark and messy and despairing as we struggle to work out who we are and what we should be doing in the world as we find it.

But, into such a world as this and into such lives as ours God comes at Christmas. God is born as a real human baby. And through this God demonstrates his deep love and care for humanity. Through this God brings us hope. Through this God announces that darkness will not have the final word, for if God comes as a human to the worst of places, to the shitty places, by his presence he reclaims the world as being intended and destined for Holiness.

By becoming human God shows us what being human should look like and mean. We are intended to emulate Christ to love in a dark and despairing world, to proclaim that God still loves the world and that the darkness cannot ultimately prevail. We are intended together to be the church, to keep praying, to show love where we find opportunity and to help to build a better, more loving, world.

The light of Christ has come into the world. This is the Christmas hope. The Darkness will be defeated because our undefeatable God wills it to be so. This is the heart of the Christian faith. This is at the heart of the story we tell each Christmas:

A woman has a baby in a cow shed. And that baby is God.

This is the reason I can wish you all a very happy Christmas. Amen.