

We will leave here this morning, I trust, with happy smiles and a deep seated feeling of joy to the world. Christmas is here and Christmas brings a sense of good will to all people. Enemies put down their arms for a few hours and play football; every Scrooge becomes Santa for a day; and every Grinch's heart grows two sizes and he leads the Christmas cheer. It is a different atmosphere from, say, Good Friday, when we leave the Church in silence and with heavy hearts and heavy tread.

Why is there such a difference? Why, because at Christmas we celebrate a birth, and with the birth of this baby comes hope for the world. On Good Friday we commemorate a cruel death, and death evokes sadness and brings to mind our own inevitable end.

True, no doubt. But the evangelists who proclaim the birth of the Christ-child are clearly announcing the birth of someone destined to be rejected and killed. His rejection begins in his first hours of life. The road to Calvary begins in Bethlehem.

Luke tells us that Mary placed her first-born in a feeding-trough because there was no room in the inn. The first visitors are shepherds, people who share the occupation and the hills of the child's greatest ancestor, David the king, but their profession is now viewed as a shameful one, of men who are not to be trusted, not suitable for polite society. Jesus will live his life on the outside of polite society until his life ends in great pain between thieves, while polite society looks on and mocks him.

Matthew gives us a more dramatic story of the child's early life. A wicked king seeks to kill the child and slaughters children (his own children were among many he killed) in his paranoid desire to keep power. And magic men from the mysterious East will bring blessing when the wicked king wants betrayal from them. In all this Jesus is seen as a new Moses but Matthew is looking forward as well as back; and in the future there will be a leader in Jerusalem who is perturbed along with all of the holy city and he will pronounce death on this 'King of the Jews'. That title is used by Matthew only in his infancy account and in the Passion.

John in his Prologue, the Gospel of this third Mass of Christmas, tells us without historical narrative that the Word "was in the world that had its being through him
and the world did not know him.

He came to his own domain
and his own people did not accept him."

The Christmas story is, on the surface, a story without a great deal of joy. Even the message of the angels appears insubstantial. We are, after all, still waiting for the peace among all people that they announced.

Now I do not want you to go from here this morning with doleful faces and muttering "Humbug". The occasion is one of fundamental joy - but we have to look a little deeper to find it.

Jesus is "God-with-us". It is a literal truth three evangelists can only hint at. The unshakable monotheism of Judaism would not allow explicit talk of a man-who-is-God then, any more than Islam could accept it today. By the time John's Gospel is in its final form it is a truth that can be explicitly stated -
"In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God".

Following the trajectory of the first three Gospels and on the explicit statements of the fourth the Church's mature teaching will be based - that Jesus is true God and true man, one in substance with the Father, God from God, Light from Light.

In Jesus we see God in human form. When God comes into our world, what God looks like is Jesus. How does God look when cast in human materials? He looks like a baby, weak, powerless, dependent. When he is a working man, he looks, we presume, like any ordinary working man, familiar with the mundane and the ordinary; unfamiliar with authority and power. When he emerges from obscurity he looks like a penniless prophet whose means of support must be provided by the charity of others. He does have a mighty way with words - the stories he tells are spellbinding but also disturbing. He can heal and that makes him popular but the authorities fear crowds, and his popularity becomes a danger. When he dies he looks like a man with no friends and many enemies. He leaves the world as he came into it - naked in the company of thieves and no-goods.

This is God among us.

When we think of God, when we try and describe God the words we probably use are words of majesty and power - omnipotent, omnipresent, eternal, Lord of hosts, enthroned on the cherubim, living in unapproachable light, awesome beyond description...

None of these words and phrase should be applied to the babe of Bethlehem, the wandering preacher, the condemned criminal. If Jesus is God-among-us, then we need then to re-think our understanding of God.

The God we see in Jesus is a God who rejects power and influence, authority and prestige. A God who associates with the poor of the land, whose companions are characterised by their ordinariness. A God who gives away all that he has and who in giving everything away receives everything.

"Though he was in the form of God, Jesus emptied himself, and assumed the condition of a slave...and was humbler yet even to accepting death on a cross. And (therefore) God gave him the name which is above all other names."

God's power is in powerlessness. God the Trinity is total self-giving and receiving in an eternal dynamic.

The crib was popularised by the little poor man, Francis of Assisi. He saw this truth of God and imitated it. And he sums it up in one of his hymns:

"It is in giving that we receive,
and in dying that we are born to eternal life"