We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

Says Prospero in those famous words from The Tempest. I remember seeing a very powerful art installation by the artist Bill Viola. It is called The Nantes Triptych and it consists of three panels. The left panel shows a video image of a young woman in the process of giving birth, inspired by the birth of the artist’s son. The right panel shows a video image of an old woman, the artist’s mother in the process of dying. Both are documents of actual events. The central panel shows an image of a clothed man underwater moving through alternate stages of turbulence and undulating stillness, suspended as it were between birth and death. The juxtaposition of these three images are very powerful and I have never forgotten this triptych though I saw it many years ago. It makes you so aware of the silent mystery which borders both ends of our lives. The beginning and the end strangely mirror each other- this fragile life of ours, bordered by such vast unknowns. I have just had a friend staying with me who on Friday night was present as her elderly Godmother past away. She described to me how her Godmother’s close friends and family gathered around the bed as her breathing became more laboured and they said the Lord’s Prayer together. My friend who is a priest said “I felt that I was like a midwife helping my Godmother into a new birth.” Birth and death, the beginning and the end. These are not things we usually spend much time thinking about, although they are essential to us all.

Last week, as some of you know, I was in hospital. And actually, strange to say, I found it a deeply reflective experience. I hope you will forgive me if I spend a little time sharing some of those reflections because I think it speaks very much of the themes of Advent- indeed of the things of God both at the heart and on the edge. Being in hospital, Georgina, our Pastoral Assistant commented to me, is actually an experience of what it means to be mortal. I told her I thought there was much truth in that. Days and nights become indistinguishable and it’s all about human bodies in pajamas lying on beds, medicines, and flesh and blood, lots of it - blood tests, blood pressures, cannulas and drips, and grunts and calls and snores, and food trollies and bed pans, and opening and closing curtains and teams of consultants, nurses and students scooting between beds with lap tops on wheels talking above you and through you.

So firstly it’s about learning to wait and learning to trust, because there is a lot of waiting: the realisation when you are in hospital is very simple that you are not defined, nor can you define yourself, by what you do. My first thought on being in hospital was the thought “what about…?” What about all the things I should be doing? What about all those plans and things in my diary which won’t happen? At first it’s profoundly worrying because you have so conditioned yourself to think that your life depends on fulfilling your obligations, and that to be abandoning them seems profoundly reckless or irresponsible. Until you begin to realize that things carry on…. of course things carry on. And sometimes you have to let your fondest held projects go. Surprisingly, sometimes one finds that what you thought you had abandoned, in fact grows its own wings, or discovers different players to bring those projects to fruition. Advent is about learning to trust in life - the life of others and the life of God beyond yourself.

Secondly, recognising ones neighbour. One of our strongest instincts of course is self-preservation, in other words survival. If you are in pain you obviously don’t want the pain to get worse. If you think you are in danger you don’t want to be abandoned or forgotten. These survival instincts are
basic and often fierce. On my first night, I remember having very little awareness of anybody but myself. However, what slowly breaks into your consciousness on a ward is also the needs of those in beds around you, and becoming increasingly receptive to the bodily well-being of others. Like dear Christian in the bed opposite me who was very much sicker than I was. One night he asked the question “Is it day or night? Am I still alive or am I dead....?” And when I answered him that he was alive he replied: “How do I know that I’m alive?” Profound theological questions. What I found most moving was the way the nurses cared for him – they were so gently present to him during that journey into the shadow lands of human mortality. I was aware too that everyone in the ward was not being judged on wealth or status, or importance, or even age - it was simply about those most in need at a particular time of medical care. So, if a case was more serious or more life threatening, then of course that case took precedence. If I had to wait longer for my scan because someone else’s need was greater, there was a justice in that, rather than a reason for complaint. And I watched roles changing around me- the patient becoming the carer- Michael in the bed opposite who had seemed so very frail after his operation now growing stronger and able to encourage others on the ward. “You look so much better” I told Michael. He did. Michael beamed and asked me “And how are you getting on?”. On my first day I had resented the other people in the ward. Time, speed, attention to me had seemed the priority - what emerged after the first few days was a more generous patience and spaciousness. Perhaps in our frenetic world we do not have the chance to live that graciousness as graciously as we would like. Advent is about recognising the Advent of God in others.

The third thing I reflected upon was the goodness of presence. I do think sometimes that we have lost that, because of the busyness of our lives and the mass instant methods of communication available to us we. They say that using a mobile phone while driving can be far more dangerous than drunk driving. It is because the mobile phone takes away our presence. It leads us into a different virtual reality. In a Guardian article the reporter described taking his young son for a walk with his mobile phone, and realising his interaction with his mobile phone was far more compulsive than his awareness of his young son with him - to the point where he looked up and realised his son had wondered off without him realising it. In contrast, visiting hours in hospital is like a throw-back to a bygone age. People actually take the trouble to visit one another in hospital and spend time with you. It can be a rare and beautiful gift to be visited by kindness. No diversion, no agenda, no TV, no e-mail. Just simple presence. I was aware of how good people are. How sensitive to not staying too long, and actually how both patient and visitor were enriched by this face to face encounter. And they write you cards and letters. I was aware how good this congregation is and felt buoyed up by that love. So thank you. Advent is about the ministry of presence to those we care about and awareness of acts of human kindness we receive. Especially the kindness of those who do extra work to cover for you while you are way, like my clergy colleagues.

The fourth thing I thought about was the nature of gift. One of the people in my ward spent a lot of his time complaining about what was going on. The food, the regime, the frustration, the doctor’s diagnosis or lack of one, the nurse’s instructions, the lack of clear progress. Of course these things may well have been both frustrating and true. But I was very aware of blessing. Food, care, expertise, medical skill, medicine, people all trying to make you better completely free of charge. And then at the end of a week you walk out like you have just received this massive gift, and no one gives you any bill or even expects you to say thank you. Isn’t that like the experience of God’s grace all around us? Advent is about gratitude for the greatest gifts of your life that you may have taken for granted.

Finally I would like to say a word about prayer because for me this whole experience was similar to a prayer. Lord Jesus Christ have mercy on me. God’s mercy- the gift of God underpinning all that we are- all of our lives. God present but sometimes hidden and unrecognised. It’s sometimes only when we are a little stripped down that God’s presence is once again uncovered in our lives. We try so much so often to be in control, and self-sufficient and secure. We try so hard not to be dependent that we block out the very source of our life and being. There is nothing wrong with being afraid but we fear our fear. There is nothing wrong with facing difficulty and failure, but we have difficulty in accepting that we are in difficulty and that we can fail. It is not so much the problem but the commentary on the problem within our hearts and minds that wears us down and saps our spirit. But does not Christ show that it is these very wounds- the signs of our mortality- that can also
become the signs of resurrection. Our wounds are the doors through which Christ comes home to us. Is it not a borrowed stable that became the home of the incarnation? Is it not here in this place of unknowing that we begin to know the liberating love of God? Advent is about entering into the prayer of silence before those great unknowns.

All I have spoken are advent themes - trust, presence, waiting - awareness of the other, the gift of God’s grace, the nature of prayer the gift of healing. These are not lessons of the mind - these are lessons learnt within the soul, within our very flesh and blood. Sometimes our religious faith becomes another means of searching for certainty. Like John the Baptist we seek proofs -- for God to provide the mail order, the Christmas bonus, the credit or the mortgage that we need. We want visibles, not invisibles, quantifiable ends, not mysteries, control not a God greater than all human understanding. And yet God does not provide easy take-aways. Instead, God invites us to enter the place of unknowing - to leave behind the safety of our attempts at certainty; to rediscover the place of his grace.

The place where the blind see and the sighted are seen to be blind - where the deaf hear but may, in our noisy world, still be unheard.
To the place where the lame walk- run, dance even, while seemingly confined to their wheel chairs and where the lepers are cleansed even though the world may still treat them as outcasts.
How do we know this- well we are the blind, the deaf, the lame, the leper, and it is only when we realise that, that the kingdom of God begins to be revealed to us and through us.

So if you want to learn about Advent spend a week in hospital or come to think about it- just open the Advent door to discover Christ at the heart and on the edge.