I got a call from a journalist around the second week of October. I guess it was a slow news week so she’d tried everyone else and thought she’d get a story out of me. She said, ‘Did you see the Christmas decorations are up on Oxford Street already?’ I said, ‘How ’bout that.’ She said, ‘Don’t you think everything’s all getting so commercial?’ I said, ‘You know, I’ve been visiting Oxford Street for quite a while, and it’s been pretty commercial all that time, so far as I can recall.’ She said, ‘But Christmas – don’t you think it’s all got so commercial?’ I said, ‘Well people have got to make a living, and this is the time of year customers like to buy things. As a matter of fact, we have a business here at St Martin’s, and we do about a third of our turnover in the last couple of months of the year too. If the storekeepers want to spruce up the street by putting some sparkly tinsel and twinkly lights outside, I think that’s rather nice.’

My journalist wasn’t going to be deterred. She said, ‘But don’t you think it’s confusing for people? With Harvest just done and Hallowe’en and Guy Fawkes coming up – they get all these festivals mixed up.’ I said, ‘I’d give people a bit more credit than that. Most folk I know are pretty intelligent. They know an angel on a tree from a witch on a broom; they know a firework from a harvest loaf; they know a bonfire from a Christingle candle.’

At this stage I began to get a sense of what was going on. I said, ‘Are you calling because you want me to be angry and denounce people going to parties and buying presents?’ And then I felt a wave of sadness and shame sweep over me, for my church and for its clergy. How had we got ourselves a reputation for being against people celebrating Christmas, enjoying each other and giving each other gifts? How had we created a situation where a journalist thought she could get an easy story by telling a vicar there were lights on Oxford Street and then sitting back and waiting for a feast of denunciation? So I said, ‘Actually I’m really happy that people are out spending their money on showing other people how much they love them. I think that’s rather beautiful.’

But she hadn’t finished. She got out what was clearly her trump card. ‘Don’t you think the problem is,’ she said conclusively, ‘that Christmas has just got so materialistic?’ I was silent. She said, ‘Are you still here?’ I said, ‘Yes, I’m still here. But I need to tell you you’ve got that one completely wrong. Christmas is the celebration that God became material. At Christmas we remember just how God took material form inside the womb of Mary, God was wrapped in the material of swaddling clothes when Jesus was laid in a manger, God was put at material risk when Herod killed all the babies in Bethlehem looking for the new-born king. Christmas is about materialism. That’s exactly what we’re celebrating. Christmas is about the God who made the material world at creation becoming part of the material world in Jesus. You can’t get more materialistic than God. It’s impossible.’

At that point the journalist realised she didn’t have a story and we called it a day. But if she’d wanted to hear more, this is what I’d have told her. The old-fashioned phrase ‘That’s not material’ is a way of saying, ‘That doesn’t matter.’ The words material and matter come from the same root. They’re about substance, as in the phrase ‘vegetable matter,’ and about importance, as in the famous song lyric, ‘nothing really matters to me.’

The Christmas story is about what really matters. It turns out almost every detail in the story is about something easily ignored or people who’re habitually told they don’t matter. The story begins with the shabbiness of a woman pregnant with a baby her husband-to-be hasn’t fathered. Women with no economic independence or social standing matter. Then there’s a census that drags people
back to their father’s home town, leaving Mary and Joseph with no bed for the night. Homeless people matter. Then they have their baby and lay him in an animal feeding trough. All of God’s creatures matter. The new family get their first visit from social outcasts, shepherds, who’re despised because they can’t keep the ritual washing regulations. Socially excluded, dirty, rough, despised people matter. Then they get a visit from some foreigners, travellers of another faith. People of other races and religions matter. Then the little family escapes to Egypt because Herod wants to kill the little boy. Oppressed people and refugees matter.

In the last 200 years our culture has turned Christmas into a season of bonhomie and the idealisation of the nuclear family. But the Christmas story is telling us what matters: women with no status, migrants and homeless people, the non-human creation, social outcasts, foreigners, people of other religions, oppressed people and refugees. It’s not that we should at Christmas spare a thought for disadvantaged people: they’re what the Christmas story is all about, they take all the main parts, they’re centre stage. They’re what matters. Of course we sentimentalise the Christmas story to be about a little donkey, a dusty road, a lullaby and a baby who lays down his sweet head. But that’s because we struggle so much with who the story is really about, and what the story is really saying. We want it to be a sweet story about long ago. It turns out it’s a very challenging story about today.

What else matters at Christmas? God matters. All the angels in the sky and stars in the heavens, decisions of emperors and movements of peoples – they’re the backdrop for what’s really going on. What’s really going on is expressed in the angel’s word, Emmanuel: God is with us. The whole of the Old Testament is about God wanting to be with us: creating Adam and Eve to be companions, making a promise with Noah to be faithful to us, pledging to Abraham to be with his people forever, making a covenant with Moses and then with David to be their people’s God always. Finally in the Christmas story God turns that promise of companionship into flesh and blood. God becomes material. God no longer makes a material covenant in a rainbow or in a tablet of stone or something else: God becomes that covenant in the flesh and blood of Jesus. Jesus is the place where God’s divinity and our humanity meet. God becomes material. That’s why it’s so silly to say Christmas has become materialistic. It always was. It’s always been all about God becoming material. God becomes substance – matter. God... matters.

But this leaves us with one last thing that matters at Christmas. We’ve just seen that God matters. But Jesus is not just God. That may seem a bizarre thing to say – how can there be anything more amazing than to say Jesus is God? Well, there is something just as amazing. Jesus is not just God. Jesus is also human. Jesus takes on the flesh of a weak, fragile, clumsy, vulnerable baby. What that’s saying is that human beings matter. Human flesh matters. We’re not just spiritual beings imprisoned or contained in a physical body. Our physical existence, our material reality, our earthly life really matters. Not just now, but forever. Jesus came to be with us in time so that we might come to be with God in eternity.

There’s a deep, terrifying, lonely question inside almost every one of us, which we seldom name and never share. And this is the question: do I matter? Do I matter to anyone? Do I matter for a while – or do I in any sense matter forever? What makes us never ask the question is the fear that the answer is, finally, no. But behold the wonder of Christmas. This is precisely why Christmas matters. At Christmas God makes the people who generally don’t matter the centre of the story. At Christmas God becomes just like you and me because what matters to God is being with us always. And at Christmas God is speaking to each one of us, as gently, unthreateningly, passionately and disarmingly as we can possibly imagine.

And what God is saying, through taking the material of our life, are the words that matter more than any we’ll ever hear: ‘You matter. You matter right now. You matter forever. You matter to me.’