One of the first sermons I ever preached in this country many years ago was in St Paulinus Church in Crayford. It was shortly before Christmas and having learnt that actions often speak louder than words and one should endeavour to show rather than tell- I endeavoured to do just that. I went up into the pulpit with a cloak and a crown over my white cassock and chasuble and began to tell the story of how the King of heaven, the creator of the universe came down to earth so that he could be one with his people. He did not want to live far away in a distant land he wanted to be with his people. As I told the story I took off the crown, and then the cloak, I came down the steps from the pulpit and gave the crown to one of the children in the front row, and the cloak to another surprised member of the congregation. Then I took off my stole and white cassock so that I was now standing in the middle of the congregation in my shirt sleeves. I thought it was a dramatic demonstration of Christ’s self-emptying but I had not reckoned on a London congregation because one woman called out: “Are you going to stop there. I thought you were going to take everything off. I thought you were going to go all the way for a moment!” I had no intention whatsoever of going all the way as she put it. But when I thought about it Jesus Christ did do just that he went all the way, and more. That’s what so incredible about this story we remember today.

As you come into St Martin’s you may have noticed on the portico the sculpture “In the Beginning” A naked life seize child, still attached to his umbilical cord is lying on his back-defenceless, carved from a monumental 4.5 tonne block of stone. This is God going all the way. And it gets in your way as you come out of the church or as you go in. But that’s just the point. You have to stand on tiptoe, strain to see the full view of the child laying there but that’s the point too- look and see. This naked child is the source of your very life. It’s the vulnerability of this child that confronts most especially in winter when the portico sometimes seems to funnel the cold wind and rain and the child is exposed to the elements- one morning and I came in and a homeless man was lying there on the stone curled around the child. “What on earth are you doing? I asked “I’m keeping the baby warm” he replied “Arent I allowed to do that?” He had a point. It was a bitterly cold morning but I wondered if it were not reciprocal and if it was not this baby who was not keeping him warm, indeed is not this exposed child the one who can keep all of us warm through the chills and struggles of our lives.

The thing about the birth of a child is that it is simultaneously totally beautiful and miraculous and at the same time totally vulnerable. So perhaps we respond with a mixture of both fear and awe. I remember my sister in law saying after the birth of her first child that no one can ever prepare you for this. She had spent years at school, years training to be an artist- but when you have a child, everything, everything changes. You actually have to reach deeper than intellect or education and discover the instincts of your humanity- It is both amazing and terrifying because there cradled in your arms is a new life- and that fragile life is totally dependent upon you for survival: and there is a feeling of astonishment and overwhelming responsibility for this life that has somehow been entrusted into your care. And within you an instinct written into your very genes that this child is more precious than anything else, even more precious than your own life.

My eldest brother once said that you often think that your children will be like you, a chip off the old block think- and then they never cease to astonish you by being totally unique and totally different from everything you ever imagined or dreamt. I think he was a bit disconcerted because he had always thought of himself as having good taste and that his son would share his love of fishing,
Manchester United, Elvis Presley and second hand suits: instead he found his son asked him if he would wait 100 yards from the school gates so as not to embarrass him in front of his mates.

Every birth is miraculous. Every child unique. Have you held a child in your arms and not been overwhelmed by the miraculous nature of life, and been totally unable to think how anyone can not consider your baby the most astonishing happening in the world. Look at those tiny fingers, look at those minute toes, how God made them nobody knows. And one thing is certain this is a story every single person in this church shares. Because we were once that little naked baby born into the world and cradled in someone's arms. And it's also God's story- the story of the birth of Jesus Immanuel “God with us”. That's how Jesus Christ is born- totally divine and totally human- simultaneously. The child of heaven and yet a child of flesh and blood in need of warmth, and milk and care and without even a proper roof over his head, totally exposed, totally vulnerable. This defenceless child is also God. It unsettles us: how can God Almighty become a dependent child? How can this vulnerable infant be the saviour of all? But that reality is at the very heart at our Christian faith.

We often treat God like an intervention force. The one who like the US Cavalry if we pray faithfully enough will come to save the day- a God who can work our miracles, answer our prayers, heal the loved one, help us get the right job and give us what we want like Father Christmas. And what we find is that he doesn’t provide any of those answers. He’s not a solution. He is the life, the mystery, the most precious thing you have ever held onto and at the same time the most terrifyingly needy. The most intimate and yet the most unfathomably unknown. This is not going to be a few hours, or even a few days, this relationship, is going to be for the rest of your life. That’s the meaning of Christmas. God entrusting himself into human hands- our hands- our own poor often unprepared unworthy lives become the manger of God. Christmas changes the way we see the world. Christmas says that God will be with an unmarried mother, and the man who sticks by her struggling to do what is right, he will be with them poor, alone, homeless, in the danger of the stable birth, in the signs of heaven, in the joy of vagrant shepherds who turn up on the night and three strange migrants who have scene in a star a new way of living. He will be with them as they flee persecution and seek safety in a foreign land. This is a God who is our saviour and yet needs us to save him. He is the most precious gift in the world but needs us to keep his love alive.

And yes perhaps that’s it. We like Mary and Joseph and a group of shepherds we are not going to be defined by our power or wealth our knowledge or achievements we are human because of the way we live and love and relate to one another. Here called to be bearers of the Christ child too we will learn the compassion, the forgiveness, the tenderness, the fierce unconditional love of God. A love so great that it terrifies. And simultaneously not only are we the bearers of God, we are also the ones who God bears- because cradling Christ God cradles us-

Again and again I come back to the words of one of the modern martyrs of our church Brother Christian de Chérge, a Trappist monk who was killed by religious extremists in Algeria 1996. His story has a particular relevance to our time and the fear generated by the atrocities in Paris. Though threatened Christian and his community decided to stay- to continue to live out their vocation in love for God and for the people of Algeria.

These are the words he preached on Christmas Eve shortly before his life was taken by extremists. He says: “Tonight we will welcome the one who was born for us, absolutely helpless and already so threatened. Afterwards we will find salvation in undertaking our various tasks, in the kitchen, the garden, the home, the workplace, the church. We will all in our own lives have to resist prejudice, injustice and violence and day after day we will discover that to which Christ beckons us. It's to be born. Our identities as men and women go from one birth to another. From birth to birth. We must each end up bringing to the world the child of God that we are. The incarnation for us is to allow the reality, the filial reality of Jesus’ love, to embody itself in our humanity. The mystery of the
incarnation is what we are called to live. In this way what we have already lived takes root. And what we are called to live in the future is filled with possibility.”

In these few words he sums up all I would like to say. Each one of us here have been called to that same birth - called to bring to the world the child of God that we are - to allow the child of God to be embodied in our lives and what is more to recognise the child of God embodied in the lives of others. Christ incarnated not only in a piece of stone outside this church but in our own flesh and blood. That’s the meaning of the bread and wine, the body and blood you are about to receive in this Christmas Eucharist. And each day simply, practically humbly we must go on doing this - making Christ present - in our homes, in the streets, in our work places and in each one of our relationships living out the mystery of the incarnation - Immanuel God with us. In this way what we have already lived takes root and what we are called to live in the future is filled with possibility. That is the meaning of HAPPY CHRISTMAS.