Readings: Genesis 18.1-15; 1 Samuel 2; Isaiah 9.2, 6-7; Luke 2.6-20

I remember my father leaning out of the upstairs window to shout, “You have a baby brother!” I was playing in the garden with my elder brother, came running inside, climbed the stairs, silenced, and into the bedroom where my mother was holding this little baby wrapped in a blanket against her like a small parcel of new life. Where had this new life come from? Even at an early age I remember being simply astonished; suddenly a new person in the room. A miracle. I think all of us have felt that when we’ve seen those tiny fingernails, minute nose, and glazed eyes looking up from the bundle thrust into our hands. Never mind the immaculate conception, all births are miraculous conceptions and what is more, this particular miracle is the most inclusive miracle of them all, for every one of us, when we were born, have been there. We were all once that child.

The birth of Jesus took place 2000 years ago but year after year this birth of Jesus is still celebrated. Over and over again this church in the last month has been packed with people coming to sing carols and to hear again the story of the nativity. What is it that attracts us to this story? Is it just nostalgia for the past? Is it because we love the tunes and love to sing? Is it just a tradition we follow, like turkey and crackers and Christmas pudding hyped by every store in town to make us spend, eat and drink more? Yes perhaps it is all these things and much more than all these things. It is the reversal of power structures. In a world where we have grown disillusioned by the misuse of power, in a world where the horror of war and violence and human suffering continue to confront us on a daily basis – and today we hold Syria and the Sudan especially in our hearts – in a world in peril because of human greed and our exploitation of creation – into this world a child is born: innocent, homeless entirely vulnerable... a child who will change everything, turn lives upside-down. This child will be born in total poverty, a shed for cattle. The witnesses will be a group of misfits: itinerant homeless shepherds from the hills, wandering gypsies. The other witnesses to come to visit will be migrants, like Bulgarians and Romanians from a foreign land. In Jerusalem both the state and religious authorities are so busy defending their own positions that they see this Christ child as a threat to their power and respond with horrific violence in which children are massacred and our Christ child becomes a refugee, his parents fleeing with him to save his life. Look around our world today – sound familiar? The same tragedies continue to repeat themselves. And yet for those who have eyes to see the same truth continues to unfold. God’s truth. God’s creative life. It begins often at the lowest point. At the point that you thought you were defeated, at the point of rejection and need. At the point of seeming death, in the darkness, God’s life begins... and there is hope and a future and a life; as real and miraculous as a small newborn baby, crying and gulping for air. I think the story of Jesus’ birth is the story of life which belongs to each one of us. This story speaks the language of all humanity and also the language of God. In the words of the carol ‘the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.’ The child is a sign both of all that is possible, and also all that is most vulnerable; hope and fear, meeting – all that is possible in God and all that you risk by loving. God communicates with us not with arguments, or debates, or theological treatises; God speaks to us most directly in a tiny human life and the cries of a powerless baby. ‘The Word was made flesh and lived among us.’ Lancelot Andrews, in a Christmas sermon in1620, described the incarnation of Christ as “The Word that cannot speak.” The phrase draws attention to powerlessness of this baby but also the power of this human life to be, to be the most complete expression of God beyond words. Rowan Williams writes: ‘In a world of competition, frenzied chatter, control obsession, there is a terrible aptness in a God who speaks in a child’s cry...
silence, stumbling, and the apparent crudity of this stable birth tell you far more about God than the languages of would be adult sophistication.

And so each Christmas we are called to enter the stable door again. To try and let our eyes grow accustomed to the darkness and to gaze upon, and worship with the others who have also come to witness, the miracle of this baby born for our salvation. In the words of my sister-in-law after the birth of her first son: “the responsibility is both terrifying and amazing.” You know that things will never be the same again and that this immaculate beautiful, vulnerable life of God depends upon us. It is a life which humbles you. And your fear is met by the hope of the angels: “Do not be afraid for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for you and for all people.”

Pope Francis has recently talked of Christmas being God’s meeting with his people. The time which speaks of both tenderness and hope. And he has warned of the danger of a world that forgets this life of God. If we stop recognising that life, that love, at the centre of all things, then we are in danger of losing all that is most precious in life. He says this, “The greatest danger in today’s world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures and a blunted conscience. Whenever our interior life becomes caught up in its own concerns, there is no longer room for others, no place for the poor, no place for the vulnerable. God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good in us fades... Many fall victim to it and end up resentful angry or listless.”

Yet Christmas speaks to us of a different way of living. It speaks of God’s hope. What is that hope? Well I want to end by reading to you the words of Brother Christian de Charge, one of the modern martyrs of Algeria. They are the words he preached on Christmas Eve shortly before his life was taken by extremists. He preaches this: “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.”

Tonight you too are called to come to this stable – the place of poverty where our lives meet this vulnerable baby Jesus. And we too are called like his mother and father, like those first shepherds and wise men to a Good News for all people. How can his love his compassion, his goodness, his forgiveness his peace for the world be born again in us?

I wonder what it is that Godbeckons you towards. I wonder what God wants to be born in you tonight? I wonder how you can bring to the world the child of God that you truly are?