

Midnight Mass 2019

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Nativity is a comfortable word. Comfortable, because we tend to confine it to the celebration of Christmas. If we mention “the nativity”, we are referring to a particular birth, one with which we are altogether comfortable. The reasons why we are altogether comfortable with that particular birth are many and various, but they do include the fact that we have - over many centuries – sanitised that particular birth so that it looks, sounds and smells very little like a birth. Glance at any traditional nativity scene and you will see not the baby Jesus but the superbaby Jesus – a newborn who despite being newborn looks at least ten months old, can do all sorts of physical things which newborns cannot do – sit up, hold his arm aloft, and so on – and usually looks absolutely nothing like a middle-eastern Jew.

We like the word nativity, partly because it avoids our using the far less comfortable word childbirth. That

word tends to remind us of danger and the possibility of death, a possibility all too real for so many people in so many parts of the world, the so called developed world included. Historically, childbirth was fraught with peril for everybody until fairly recently. But we would rather not think about that, and so we stick with nativity and we concentrate on our superbaby, cradled in a manger which seems miraculously to look quite a lot like a rather snug little bed, and not very much like a feeding trough.

If we wish, we can blame tradition for these sanitizations. A visit to the renaissance paintings in the Ashmolean Museum across the road will reveal a number of glorious depictions of a superbaby with an equally super mother. One of my favourites among these, by Pinturicchio, shows a Jesus apparently nearer three years than three days, standing almost upon one leg on top of his mother's lap, gazing out and offering a priestly benediction with his chubby fingers arranged in the perfect form of a bishop's blessing. But we should be careful with our assumptions. In the fifteenth century, one simply could not sanitize childbirth – it was all too

real and all too dangerous. In depicting a baby who appears to be superhuman, the artist is not patronising us with falsehood, he is challenging us with truth: of course a baby cannot do these things, and so one is left with a question – how is this possible, a preamble to the more important question, how can a baby be God? As daft as an infant who doesn't cry is the notion that God would pitch his tent among us. But it is that notion that we proclaim and celebrate as we come together this night.

It is we who have sanitized the nativity because we enjoy the extraordinary privilege of modern medical science. The Christians of centuries past, and of many places and situations present, did not and do not need to be reminded of the terror of childbirth. We, on the other hand, probably do. We need our minds and our sensibilities prodded, before we recognise that there is nothing comfortable about the God who comes to us bloody and screaming and lying in the feeding trough.

Except, of course, that there is. There is something comfortable about it, and if there were not then I

imagine most of us would not be here this evening. Tidings of comfort and joy, the carol urges upon us. What is this comfort and joy, if it is not our bowdlerized nativity scene with its cosy blue-eyed toddler with curly blond locks? It is a strange comfort, a comfort we do not understand, a comfort which makes little sense to our ideas of wellbeing but which remains a comfort nonetheless. It is the comfort of Emmanuel, of God with us, of the good news of that genuine nativity which tells us that we are not alone, that across the empires of space and light and time and eternity reaches the intimacy of love, reaches the power of the God who made us, reaches the very nature of the creator which is to give himself to us, to come among us and make his home with us in all our pride and fear and vulnerability.

That baby, is our comfort and our hope. But he remains a baby. Not a superbaby, not a pretty doll, but a child a few hours old. Our hope is in a real baby, and in real childbirth, the most normal and natural and wonderful and helpless thing which we can possibly imagine. Our hope is in the helpless. And there is the rub. God with us, God among us, is not a superhero. The Christian

doctrine of the incarnation is not the teaching that God comes from afar to sort everything out and goes away again, like the mysterious stranger in so many movies. God comes among us, in order to stay put. God comes among us in order to live and grow and be the human ordinary person that you and I must also always be. The incarnation gives us God in human form, but human form begins with infancy, it begins in the womb and at the breast, it begins with complete and utter vulnerability and helplessness.

This is a strange sort of comfort. Our hope is in the helpless. The child lies in the feeding trough, we look, we see, we turn away. The child remains in that trough. Left there, the child would simply die. Our fear of the newborn is a fear of need and responsibility, as well as a fear of earthy reality, of blood and screams and faeces. The challenge of the newborn could not be more obvious – the child is vulnerable, helpless. Without help, it will perish. Response is not simply desirable, not just a good thing which we ought to do, it is absolutely essential.

This is our comfort this Christmas time. That God comes among us as helpless, that God needs response, that the cry of the child demands embrace, nourishment, care for something other than ourselves. It demands, in other words, the human capacity for love, it demands the best that humanity can offer even as humanity tries to clean up divine love and make it into something we can leave alone, a self-sufficient superbaby. There is no such thing. There is only this baby, only the God who screams his dependence at each of us, who requires us to give of ourselves in response to the reality of need, who refuses to be contained by safety and security, by the false comfort of self and selfish pride.

Our hope is in the helpless. This is the good news of Christmas – absurd, to be sure, by the standards of the world, but good news just the same. Our hope is in the helpless because the utter dependence of this child is nothing other than the presence of God with us, the promise of salvation, the glimpse of that divine life in whose image we are made. Love comes among us demanding our response, drawing us from ourselves

and to the other, pulling us from self-sufficiency into the finite need of infinite love. Our hope is in the helpless because our hope is in the word made flesh.