

Midnight Mass of the Nativity 2019

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For many of us, certain words and images belong at Christmas time. There are whole sections of our vocabulary which probably owe their origin to the carol services we attended as children, often not understanding the words. I'm sure we all, as eight year olds, merrily trilled along to the line 'Lo, he abhors not the Virgin's womb' without having the slightest idea what we were singing about. And how many of us are likely to encounter myrrh apart from as a gift of the Magi?

Of course, the Christmas stories are stories of a nativity, a birth. And so, and I imagine this is especially true for men, when one first has children, one understands them in a new way. I never thought I would find myself using the verb to swaddle as a piece of everyday talk. But faced with a new born baby, who needs to be wrapped up, what other word would one use?

It's a lovely English word, swaddle, one of those sounds that has a nicely medieval feel about it. In our carols we meet a very similar alternative – the Shepherds who are watching their flocks by night are told that they will find the heavenly babe 'to human view displayed, all meanly wrapped in swathing bands, and in a manger laid'. Swathing is in some way the clearer word, because it conveys the sense of cutting into strips – swathes of corn are cut strips of land, and swathing bands, or swaddling cloths, are strips of cloth cut as bandages for the purpose of wrapping up a baby. This is not done simply to keep the baby warm, there are lots of simpler possibilities to do that. Rather, swaddling properly describes the ancient practice of wrapping children in cloths or bands to restrict the movement of their limbs. Among the various early sources for this process we find the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel, who tells us that after an infant was born, the umbilical cord was cut and tied, and then the baby was washed, rubbed with salt and oil, and wrapped with strips of cloth, which ensured that the child's limbs would grow straight. When the same prophet describes Israel as unswaddled, he is using the very painful metaphor of child abandonment to refer to the people of God.

Mary gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger. The first part of that description is normal enough. We don't tend to think much about it. It is the manger, the feeding trough, which attracts our attention. But perhaps we are missing something. After all, when the angel appears to the shepherds, he says 'And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger'. Why should a baby in swaddling cloths be a sign? It seems too ordinary. Now it's hard to tell exactly how to read that single verse – it may just be that the sign is the angel appearing to the shepherds, and no doubt we'd all agree that the sudden apparition of the celestial choir to a bunch of unsuspecting herdsmen is something rather less run of the mill than a baby looking like a baby. Or perhaps the sign is just the fact that the baby is in the manger – clearly not something one would expect. Or perhaps the sign is all of these things – the ordinary, and the extraordinary, come together in the child who is the sign of God's love for a world so ready to ignore him.

Whilst we focus on the wonder of Luke's story, and we should, we must not overlook its worldly aspect. A husband and wife travelling to conform with the demands of earthly power, a mother on the margins, forced to lay her newborn in an animal trough, the herdsmen guarding the sheep, all-night workers protecting the property of those much better heeled than they. This is not a glamorous tale, no matter how much tinsel we place upon it. But those swaddling cloths are particularly easy to miss, simple strips binding the baby in the way the world wants it to be bound, instructing the newborn how it is to grow, trying – with the very best of intentions – to restrict its every possibility, for fear that it will go wrong, will fail to conform, will skew itself and the world around it by growing in a way which it ought not to grow.

How wonderfully, miraculously, ironic. We can tie this baby as tightly as we like, we can tell and inform and instruct him until we are blue in the face, we can assure ourselves that we know about life and newborns have everything to learn. But this child is different. This child will not conform, he will not grow straight, he will not do what the world tells him to do. Bind him as expertly as we can, he will throw off our inhibitions and make not himself, but us, grow differently. He will make the world anew, re-form, re-order human life even as he turns the world upside down.

Love your enemy. Blessed are the poor. Forgive those who hurt you. Do not judge. Make peace. Do not condemn. Above all, love God and love your neighbour.

We won't, of course. We won't, and we don't. We'll listen to these words of love, and find them less than comfortable, find them unexpected, out of the ordinary, find them threatening as they pull so persistently at our prejudices and our securities and our certainties that self is best and stranger is truly strange. We will meet this child and watch him grow up and we will flee from his love, watch unconcerned as that love submits to power and violence, look on unsurprised as the one who refuses to conform is pushed and pulled and flogged and nailed into conformity, joining the ranks of those who dared to rebel, who paid for their difference with their lives.

In the end, we all have to conform, we suppose. Even this child, wrapped in swaddling cloths, forced to grow the way the world wants him to grow, to what the world is expecting. But life cannot be contained, by cloths, by stone, by human power and pride. Bind the love of God as tightly as you can, and it bursts forth just the same. When he was born, he was wrapped in cloths and laid in a manger, and when he is killed, he will be wrapped in cloths and laid in a tomb. And one last time, he will refuse to conform.