

## **Christmas Day 2021**

### **John 1.1-18**

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

What a year -- constant change, and yet somehow we are still stuck with so much uncertainty about what will happen next. I am very glad to see all of you here, because coming to church is a reminder that some things, at least, don't change.

Since I was very small, my mother has always put on the 1994 album "Tony Bennett: Unplugged" while she decorates her Christmas tree, and I would be scandalised if I went home and found that she had changed her habits. We all do these things, in our different ways. A small number of my friends and I read the children's book "The Dark is Rising" at this time of year, a novel that opens at the winter solstice, a story about dark and light, good and evil, and a small boy who saves the universe. It may grow ever more familiar, but it yields up more riches each time it is read.

That is what we need from our rituals: a source we can return to for meaning, over and over.

The dark and the cold make these things even more important. We need the familiar when we retreat inside our homes, into the warm,

and even more so when we retreat for other, more plague-related reasons, when not only cold and darkness, but also fear and disease, threaten. We huddle in small groups, perhaps alone, and look for comforting patterns in music, readings, and religious practices. This rite of the mass is central to our tradition, and today we celebrate it at a still point of the year, a moment at the heart of it all, when we come to the altar to meet the child who has come to meet us.

That child comes to meet us in a body: not just a suit or costume of flesh, but a body that is as central to his nature in his time on earth as ours is to us. And so the altar party genuflected when we heard the news of that child in John's gospel, the account of that incarnation, that robing in a body like ours; we knelt when we heard that "the word became flesh and lived among us." The word did not conceal itself in flesh; it became flesh. God came into the world as a person with a body.

In our exhausted world, bodies can feel like uncomfortable things to walk around in. Bodies betray us. They age, they are wounded, they stumble and fall; they are prey to disease. And part of our taking of the knee in reverence at this text is a sort of disbelief, a wonder and gratitude that this taking-on of vulnerability should have been chosen by an all-powerful God.

Vulnerability is something we can resent very much in ourselves. And so it is difficult to picture God, invulnerable and mysterious, God bigger than the universe, arriving as a newborn.

But you know what all midwives say about newborns: hold him firmly, you're not going to break him. Newborns are tough. They have a cry that is ancient, and knowing, a cry that activates the most basic instinct in us to protect and nurture and stop that noise by solving the problem. God knew what God was doing.

In all his vulnerability, “Man’s maker was made man that He, Ruler of the stars, might nurse at his mother’s breast,” writes Augustine; “that the Bread might hunger, the Fountain thirst, the Light sleep, the Way be tired on its journey... that the Healer might be wounded; that Life might die.”

The story of this child, and his parents, is so familiar to us that we might feel that in this year when we hear John’s gospel instead of the infancy narratives in Matthew and Luke, with all their pastel details, the shepherds and the star and the manger, we’re missing out on the beautiful, fleshy, specific embodiment of that particular baby in that particular manger.

But John’s gospel actually doesn’t cheat us of any of this. Instead of the specific, we have the universal. But still, in that text, we have the idea of the body. And each body is specific. Yours is not like anyone else’s. If you have one, you are unique. We respond to those words in John by kneeling, and we are invited perhaps to give more honour to our own fragile bodies, and those of people around us, by remembering that God met us in just such a body; and, indeed,

continues to meet us in that body every time we approach him in the Eucharist.

We must not forget to love each other as people who are breakable. We are not brains on sticks, or voices coming out of screens, no matter how much zooming lies behind or before us.

Mary, gazing down at the face of her beloved child, was the first disciple, but she was also his mother. “For in this rose contained was / Heaven and earth in little space”, goes the fifteenth-century carol “There is no rose of such virtue”. And so we rejoice at heaven and earth met together; a mystery that calls us to turn not only to God, but to each other in our frailty and need, and to remind ourselves through these traditions that no matter how strange the times we live in, God remains the same. His love for us continues to overflow.

Happy Christmas. Amen.