

The Sermon at the Christmas Midnight Mass 2010
at St Bene't's Church Cambridge

"To all who received him, he gave power to become children of God" John 1.1

Well, we've been given what we've long been dreaming of – a white Christmas. Suddenly we are swept back into the Victorian Christmas of Dickens and Scrooge, of sleigh bells and snowmen, of Good King Wenceslas and trudging through the snow. Christmas ought to be covered with snow, ought to be "in the bleak mid-winter". Well now it is, and our host of traditions, some ancient and some accrued more recently, are suddenly made more vivid, as though what usually passes for nostalgia is suddenly for real. It's just rather inconvenient that in our modern world of mobility so many families' Christmas plans have been disrupted by extreme weather. Tonight we spare a thought for the homeless, and the refugee, and also for those travellers stuck in airports, people left unexpectedly on their own and Christmas being celebrated not in the way we expected.

For we expect to celebrate Christmas according to passed-down traditions. There is no time of year quite so filled with ceremony and ritual as this mid-winter feast.

Take decorations. There's the tradition of holly and ivy, which owes its origins to the ancient pre-Christian Yule festival. Take the Christmas tree, an innovation which we owe entirely to Prince Albert as recently as 1840, who brought it with him from Hamburg. It's often said that the Germans do Christmas so much better than we do, which must account for one of the more modern innovations: the German Christmas Market, rapidly becoming, like the ice skating rink, the sine qua non of municipal Christmas institutions.

Then Christmas cards themselves go back to 1843; Christmas crackers likewise are a 19th century invention, invented by Tom Smith in Norwich in 1884. And then Christmas foods: ah, there's a saga. Though the dishes have changed over the centuries, the plenty and abundance has, in good times and in bad, been the hallmark of merriment. We may nowadays enjoy fine turkey, or its vegetarian equivalent, but former generations have feasted on cod, oyster, sole, or duck, goose, and quail, or beef, lamb or wild boar.

Let me tell you about the Boar's Head tradition enacted yearly at The Queen's College in Oxford. On Christmas Eve 1289, apparently, an undergraduate of that college was walking in snow near Shotover Hill, immersed in reading Aristotle. Suddenly he was attacked by a wild boar. Not having any other means of defence, he thrust the book down the animal's throat, crying "It is Greek!" This did for the boar, and its head was brought back as a trophy.

But I digress. In all the pressure and pleasure of shopping and wrapping and decorating and putting on fine clothes and partying the cry goes up: is this what Christmas is really about? Is it not about the birth of Christ? Should we not, as some say, "put the Christ back into Christmas?" Well, I want to say that Christ has never abandoned Christmas. He is thoroughly there in among all these many faceted activities and traditions. And yet there is always more of him to receive.

So I want to look now at the Christmas tradition as we find it in the Bible and then reflect on how this is at the heart of all we are doing tonight, tomorrow and in all our Christmas festivities, yet how God is offering us more.

There are two biblical strands of the Christmas tradition. We might call them the "Nativity strand" and the "Incarnation strand". We find the Nativity strand in the gospels of St Matthew and St Luke. Within these two gospels are included all the stories so beloved of Christmas cards and Christmas carols.

Luke concentrates on Mary, the Angel Gabriel, the journey to Bethlehem, the birth outside the inn, the manger, the swaddling clothes, the angelic choir and the shepherds in the field. He is mainly interested in telling us about the poverty of Jesus's birth, and has a concern for the poor.

Matthew by contrast focuses on Joseph and his dreams. He describes the Wise Men in the East following the star and offering their costly gifts to the Christ child. He is interested in the idea of the Holy Family in exile, Jesus as a refugee, and he shows how the flight into Egypt, the tricking of Herod, the massacre of the innocent baby boys were all in fulfilment of Old Testament prophetic writings. The recent four-part "Nativity" on BBC1 I thought was principally a St Matthew narrative in the way it focussed so well on Joseph.

Of course these two authors don't have the same story and they certainly contradict each other, but taking them together we get a rich and poetic picture of many of the details of the Nativity of our Lord, and in the manner of all good story-telling what isn't described in these pages has often been embroidered since, (like for instance the idea of the stable and the presence of the ox and the ass, which nowhere find a place in the pages of the Bible).

The Incarnation strand is completely different and is given us in the Prologue of St John's Gospel which we have just heard read. St John was doubtless familiar with the Nativity stories but saw no need to retell

them. Instead he interpreted what has happened in a wider, deeper, more glorious sense, so that the hearer can begin to grasp the implications of the birth of our saviour Christ.

“In the beginning was the Word”, we hear, “and the Word was with God and the Word was God”. This sonorous and enigmatic reading describes the coming of light in the darkness, borne witness to by John the forerunner. “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” Not only this, “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, yet the world did not know him.” He came to his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become the children of God”.

And then the narrative moves to its climax “And the Word became flesh, and lived among us”. This is Incarnation; how God, through his Word uttered in the beginning, took flesh and became like one of us. The silent gift of the Word, light in the darkness -- this is the aspect of the Christmas tradition which we particularly celebrate here and now in the middle of the night.

So how may we draw a connection between the rich traditions of Christmas which we enjoy and the Biblical traditions of Nativity and Incarnation? To answer this, I would like to reflect on three pairs of opposites, not to put Christ back into Christmas, for he is already there, but to reveal him there for us, and invite us to go further. The pairs are Giving and Receiving; Light and Darkness; and Word and Silence.

Giving and Receiving. It’s often said that there’s a connection between our giving of presents to our nearest and dearest with God’s giving of his Son Jesus Christ. But God’s giving can never be matched by our receiving, for his generosity is huge and his love abundant, expecting nothing in return. Is our giving like this? I suppose the real Christmas present is one that is emotionally costly, one where there’s some sacrifice about it. We all know, too, that a gift is not as important as the love which it represents. So with God: God’s gift is himself, and he is the embodiment of love, demonstrated in his taking flesh and coming among us. What can I give him, poor as I am? Let us reflect whether in all our Christmas giving, we might actually try to do a bit more receiving “To all who received him, he gave power to become children of God.” There’s always more of God to receive, always more power to become his children.

Light and darkness. The coming of Christ is light shining in darkness, just as the birth of Jesus in a dark outhouse brought a metaphorical light into the hearts of shepherds bowed down by poverty, or as the star shining above Bethlehem drew the Wise Men into the light of faith to worship the Christ child. I don’t know how you celebrate Christmas in your homes, but you may quite possibly switch off the lights and use candles on your Christmas dinner table. It has an instantaneous effect of deepening the shadows and concentrating the light source, and creating an atmosphere which people nowadays might rightly call awesome. But to turn off our lights and rely on a flickering candle flame is also symbolically to do what God did, when he laid aside his glory and came among us as a vulnerable baby. The incarnation was a sacrifice for God. As the 17th century poet Richard Crashaw puts it:

Welcome all wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span!
Summer in winter! Day in Night!
Heaven in Earth! and God in Man!
Great Little One, whose all-embracing birth,
Lifts earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth.

Word and Silence. In the beginning was the Word, yet it is uttered in silence. The Word was made flesh, and our baby cannot speak. God comes not in a babel of words, but in a language beyond speech, in a silent space. How, without words, are we to hear God’s Word? Once again it is about sacrifice, about divesting ourselves of our own verbal richness, and embracing the poverty of being silent. The most interesting television series for me in the past months was three programmes called “The Big Silence” which charted the journey of five people on a four-week long silent retreat. We watched these people first of all struggling with silence, fighting it and filling it with distractions; then gradually surrendering themselves to it as to a gift beyond words. And as we watched them open up, we saw that it was in the silence that they received God – not the God they were expecting, but God who was new and surprising. The series ended with the five of them returning to their normal lives of noise and business, with the challenge to find silence there. God and silence seemed to be the same thing, and certainly you couldn’t hope to find one without the other. And I think we left them struggling to make space, make silence, and receive God again in their normal lives – the place where we all are. And that is the challenge for us at Christmas – to receive God in just the kind of silence which we find here tonight.

Our three pairs of opposites, giving and receiving, light and darkness, word and silence, all describe the same reality. Christmas is about finding God who is new and surprising, as a baby is, receiving him in our hearts and in our homes, and finding him revealed in unexpected ways in our Christmas festivities. We long to have God incarnate himself in us, to be born in us today.

That is what we ask as we meet God tonight.