

Sermon for Christmas Midnight 2014

I want to talk about mess, mangers and the marvel that is Christmas.

Babies are messy aren't they? And giving birth to them especially so, in spite our attempts at control with all that talk about hot water and towels, there is not getting around the fact that most births involve struggle, pain and a fair amount of mess. Which is how it should be. And how it must have been for Mary and Jesus. It always troubles me when we sing the much loved carol 'away in a manger' that Baby Jesus is depicted as such a good baby; 'no crying he makes' we sing. Well if he didn't cry was he really human I find myself asking? That has been the temptation of Christianity from the beginning, to turn Jesus into a pretend human, who did not really undergo all of what it means to be human. And that is no help, because for our salvation's sake, the sake of our wholeness, God in Jesus Christ needs to understand and undertake all our human experience. For incarnation, taking on flesh and blood, is a messy business then and now.

For we too easily forget the reality of the incarnation, that God actually inhabits our human flesh, not just once and for all in Jesus of Nazareth, but now, tonight, in you and me, in every cell and atom of our bodies. This is the scandal. This what was so totally unacceptable and unimaginable to Greek minds, so careful of distinctions and boundaries, for whom flesh and spirit could not be allowed to mix. Into the realities of human life in all its mess and muddle, God is born each and every moment.

And why? Well, as Pastor Steve Garnaas - Holmes puts it "Forget all the fancy theories of salvation, how this birth will be the latchkey to our otherwise impossible forgiveness. No, it is much more simple. God wants to be with us. That's all". Messed up as we are, unholy as we may feel ourselves to be, the Beloved likes to be closer to us than breathing. God desires to be with you, indeed delights to be in you. Our heavenly Lover delights to be with all humanity because that is what love is like. With all humanity without distinctions. Distinctions are for human egos. They are nothing to do with God. The good news is that it is this simple. And this is a marvel.

All the stars in the darkness, all those shepherds and angels and wise ones, **all** of this marvel is just a divine plea for friends, for relationship, to be with us. To be Emmanuel, God with us, and indeed in us. For this is the huge scandalous shift from the Jewish understanding. The Jews understood that their God visited them. That God, immense and Transcendent nevertheless deigned to converse with mortals, especially great mortals like Abraham and Moses. God visited humans and humans could even at times visit God, in God's special dwelling places, like Mount Zion or the temple. But with the coming of Jesus Christ there is a new understanding. God comes not just to visit, but to dwell in us. To take up our ordinary human flesh, and become bone of our bone. God dwells in us and we learn to dwell in God, "I in them and they in me that we may be completely one" as Jesus was later to teach his disciples.

This is an enormous truth. A truth from which we shy away. We do not believe that our bodies are good enough for God. We do not believe that God could actually inhabit us and we still live and breathe and have voluntary action. It seems too overwhelming.

Perhaps we think that in an innocent, untarnished new born God could be pleased to dwell. That is why we can turn our eyes to God in the infant Jesus and not look away. But in the rest of us, in all our messiness and hurt, in all our inadequacy and failed promises and inability to love even those closest to us, leave alone our enemies - how can God possibly live there? Enough for most of us if from time to time God may still visit us, with undeserved joy or comfort when we cry out to him at the high and low points of our lives. But dwelling in us all day, every day, in all the confusion of an ordinary human life? - no Lord, this is too much. Yet this is exactly the point isn't it? This is why it is good news. We do not have to wait to be good enough. We do not have to wait until we have resolved our issues with our partners, children, parents, friends. We do not have to wait until we have accomplished some mighty purpose for which God has created us, but which remains still

obscure to us. God is here and now, in us and through us and nothing can keep God from God's very self, living and breathing in every single atom of our beings.

God is present, dwelling in us in all the mess.

I wonder if you have ever thought about the manger and what it stands for? We all know of course at the literal level that in the absence of any better cradle Mary lays her baby in a feeding trough for sheep - and I have said to you before that of course this works at many levels because we, the people of God understand ourselves as sheep, led by Jesus our shepherd and fed with his body. So of course Christ is laid in a feeding trough for sheep, so that we, the sheep may indeed feed upon him. But I think the manger has many other symbolic senses. A symbol, literally means things thrown together. And the more things are thrown together, the deeper and richer the symbol becomes. So I wonder what associations the manger has for you. There will be memories of that I have no doubt, both of actual mangers and watching animals feed, and of the Christmas manger scene, which most of us have carried with us since childhood. I can remember at age four or so kneeling on a crack in the floorboards of our school hall stage and trying not to wriggle as one of the smallest angels in the nativity play, and gazing down at the swaddled doll with great devotion. But what makes up the manger? I don't mean the rough wood, or the stone trough. I mean what makes a container for the Christ child who is born in each of our hearts against this Christmas? I will take a bet that most of us if we could would offer only our finest and our best, the spiritual equivalent of teak and ebony. Yet the reality is that Christ is carried in all the mess of our hearts and lives tonight. Our hurt not our hosannas is the fabric of his cradle, and that is what makes of it a place of redemption.

The joy and marvel of Christmas is the presence of Christ in the dark night of our hurts and shames . So Let your sorrows be a manger for the Christ child, a lowly resting place for the Beloved who transforms it into a heavenly throne. The real 'reason for the season' is the presence of the Beloved embedded in the world's suffering, transforming it into a place of holy encounter. So this Christmas go to the rough manger thrown together from all the sorrows and disappointments of your days and behold there the tender child, who carries all our sorrows and transforms them into joys. And marvel at this good news, that God delights to be with us, cradled in a manger formed of all the mess of our living. Amen