

The first Christmas night was a night of meetings, especially a meeting of heaven and earth, a meeting between God and humanity, in a way that has never been experienced before or since. As we have just heard in the Gospel reading, the event is captured brilliantly by Luke, the great storyteller. In a delightfully poetic way, he tells of God stepping into the story of humanity, and he shows us that the people who were caught up in the event were the poor and religiously despised, the little people of the world. We are introduced first to Mary and Joseph, two unimportant people from a remote backwater of the Roman Empire.

Luke tells us that there was no room for them at the inn. In a sense that symbolised the religion of the day: it was too full, too noisy, too narrow, too closed. It had no room for the likes of Mary and Joseph, certainly no room for a mother about to give birth to a child out of wedlock. It could not see the bigger picture, could not recognise where God really was, and so welcome and worship him there. But in the cave that serves as a stable or cattle shed, gathered round the manger, the animals' feeding trough, which serves as the child's cot, the fullness of God's life and love is welcomed by those whose hearts are empty enough to receive, silent enough to listen and open enough to wonder, and give thanks and praise.

Luke tells us that the first visitors to the child are simple shepherds, people who were held in low esteem because they were considered to be unhygienic. They are directed to Bethlehem, the town of David, the shepherd who became a king. They find the king who became shepherd. He whose role among people was as a shepherd in search of lost sheep is presaged by the appearance of shepherds as he is introduced on the stage of the world.

And in the background, we have the chorus of heaven breaking through to give meaning to this drama, so that we may understand what the story is really about. It is the mystery, the miracle, of God actually stepping into human life through the birth of this child, and in a way that we can understand. As we read the Christmas stories, that is the message, the only message that is really important, and certainly the only truth that we are being urged to grasp. The creed we shall say in a moment expresses the heart of the mystery: for us and for our salvation he became incarnate, truly human. God becomes one of us

and one with us in the experience of human life and in a way that only God could or would.

The coming of God into our human condition can only be described as divine generosity, a supreme act of love on the part of our Creator, the source and ground of our very being. Because of this we are assured that our lives from cradle to grave are of immense and eternal value, and that God reaches, as it were, down to us wherever in human life we may be. With compassionate love God shares in human life so that we might share in God's life, both now and in the fullness of eternity. It is really the only message of Christmas, and we just have to keep saying it over and over, until finally the barriers in our hearts and minds are open and undefended enough to hear it and to believe it: *It is that there is no separation between God and us, and between God and creation. There is complete union.* That's the message.

At Christmas we celebrate the incredible mystery that God sent into the world one who would personify that union—who would put human and divine together; who would put spirit and matter together. Jesus is what God looks like in human form. What other act could show us that in this life with all its ups and downs, joys and sorrows, we are not alone, we are not abandoned? Life is really good, it means something, and we are all heading somewhere. We are loved. Christmas expresses more clearly than any time God's 'I love you!' to us.

This is indeed good news. But as with all news we can receive it or ignore it or refuse to believe it. Many people rejected Jesus when he was on this earth. Many have rejected him since. But as the fourth Gospel puts it, for those who welcomed him and accepted him it was like a new birth. They became a new creation with a new vision and new potential as human beings. It has always been so.

And it remains true that in order to receive and to experience the love of God made known in Christ, we too need a cave and a manger. The cave represents our emptiness as we acknowledge our need of God, our need of a healer, a saviour. And our manger is the heart that hungers for God's presence and thirsts for God's will.

The first cave and manger were at Bethlehem, a name which means 'house of bread.' Jesus grew up to be the bread of God's life, bread and life that would be broken in complete self-giving love. As we break bread tonight as part of the Church's continuing celebration of remembrance and thanksgiving for the divine generosity, we are in a new house of bread, a new Bethlehem, a new meeting with God, who reaches down to us in love to raise us up.

We have something truly wonderful to celebrate at Christmas. By God's good grace, may its meaning and power continue to transform our lives this Christmas and in every season of the new year.