

St Peter's, Ealing  
Midnight Mass 2016  
Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> December 2016

## Power of the Incarnation

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A close relative of mine has just had his first baby. Well, actually his wife has, he stood by holding hands and trying not to pass out. All the way through his wife's pregnancy he was blasé and self-assured. Yes, the child's arrival would change things but he'd still get to the gym a few times a week. He'd still get to the occasional beer with his work mates, maintain networks. Of course, his relatives would step up and baby sit, there'd be one more to think about but everything would just pootle along. Nothing much would change. Then the baby arrived!

The change in him was miraculous. Gym, beer, workmates all gone by the board. Panics about room temperatures, duration in car seats and constant attention to baby monitors has taken over. Not only the world but the entirety of the universe has changed, and with it my relative. It is a lovely change, it does make me smile. What this change has shown me is the depth of the existential reality of child birth. The profundity of it is something I have been told of on many occasions but I think I have never seen it expressed quite so clearly before. I am sure parents among you this evening can easily empathise with this experience and may even be able to clearly reflect on what it was like for you.

Once we get this reality, the powerful change that happens in the lives of parents when their children arrive in the world, we can look at the nativity of Jesus in a very different light. The temptation is to have a child-like view of the nativity, an event seen through the eyes of children or our own childhood; maybe it is in the context of the school nativity, or the Christingle service we take our view of the nativity. The Christmas story can evoke in us childhood memories and draw us into reminiscing or remembering past joys.

For the nativity to fulfil in our lives its true meaning it needs to be grounded in the earthy reality of child birth, a very adult experience. How the arrival of this infant changes the lives of his parents; to wonder what Mary and Joseph made

of this birth. They had already had divine intervention and guidance to deal with along with visitations of angels, and then they have to deal with the birth itself which would have been traumatic enough being away from family and home. Now their lives are changed for ever by the arrival of this scrap of flesh. Then they have to take on the dawning reality of the meaning of this child's arrival; the birth of the Son of the Most High God. There are no placid, passive non-participants in this story. Its full-in, full-on parental responsibility and all that goes with it, topped off with divine intervention and the saving of the world.

If that is not enough to grapple with in this birth we should be asking what is the existential reality check for God? Parent for the first time, an intimate connection with humanity, no longer as superior creator but now intimate participant in the story of humanity; in our story. No longer is God high and lofty but grounded and inseparably bound to our flesh. In and amongst this he is now a dad, and I mean that in the most powerful and connected way. How has this changed the way of the universe?

What we begin to explore here is the nature of the incarnation. God and flesh made one in Jesus Christ. This is the salvation of the world. For us it is the existential reality of this event we begin to understand in the birth of a child. How this simple event changes life and lives. The added value comes in knowing that the father in this case isn't Joseph, but YHWH, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob. In knowing this we begin to understand what has happened in this stable in Bethlehem. That everything has changed, God, humanity, the universe, us. We have changed too. In this child, in this event, in this stable, in this family, we are changed. We are given a new hope of a new universe in which all things are made new, because God has changed for us. If we doubt this watch this child grow; and watch him die; all for you and all for me.

This intimate family scene is far more than just a crib and a mother holding her new born son. In this we all have a new beginning. This is us, our reality made new in him who came into the world as one of us to bring healing and wholeness, to save us and renew us in the power of the Holy Spirit. And if we still don't get this, look into the eyes of a new parent with their first born held in the arms and maybe you'll see what I mean.