

## Advent 4 (Christmas Eve) 2017: The Word – *Made Flesh?*

(Harold Stringer)

Today may be Christmas Eve, but principally it's the Fourth Sunday of Advent. So we've come to the last of our 'forerunners' of Christ himself.

After Patriarchs, Prophets, John the Baptist preparing the way, finally Mary, with the most direct, intimate role among the forerunners: Mother of the longed-for Christ.

There are many questions about the birth of Jesus – like the striking differences between the two accounts of it; the lack of reference to the miraculous aspect in the rest of the New Testament... these are subjects for serious Bible study.

What is undisputed is that baby Jesus was a human baby, carried to full term in the womb of a human mother, and born – despite unusual conditions – in a normal human birth. Mary would have known all the joys and the burdens of pregnancy; the fear of a first delivery – especially without her own mother for support, and in a *stable*; and recalling that strange revelation nine months earlier: *can* it have been real? Was she imagining it all? And then the terrible pain, and all that blood in the straw and how to clean up herself and the baby and keep it warm – all those taboos about blood and uncleanness in her religion... then someone has thumped the little baby on the back and the reassuring cry: he's breathing. Like any other baby. 'Little lord Jesus no crying he makes'? – hardly. Much more likely, much more: 'tears and smiles like us he knew.' 'Born of a woman, born under the Law': totally human, soon searching for his mother's milk, totally dependent. And... something more...

And what about Mary – what was she like, what happened next? We really *know* very little about her, though non-biblical traditions flourished from early on. Our image of her is hard to separate from the statues and devotional pictures which emphasize the pure, demure, submissive obedience – 'behold the handmaid of the Lord: be it unto me according to thy word.' That word 'handmaid' seems to suggest *extra* subservience, being at the beck and call of a master or mistress who has whims to satisfy. (And that was before Margaret Atwood and her tale did the word no favours!) The Greek original means anything from a slave to a servant of varying degrees including, positively, a *devoted* servant. We can surely see Mary in that role.

And there was a very different, positively rebellious side to Mary. The Magnificat can hardly be word for spontaneous word, yet neither can it have been dreamed up by Luke on a whim: it's such an unlikely and *revolutionary* utterance for a first-century Jewish woman. 'Casting down the mighty from their thrones, and lifting up the lowly. Filling the hungry with good things, sending the rich away empty.' No simpering handmaiden here!

Mary could also get things wrong – about her grown-up son's ministry, going with her other sons to bring Jesus home, afraid he was in danger of losing his mind. Yet later, there she is, standing by him at the cross; and then with the close disciples after the Ascension, so presumably sharing the transformative experience of Pentecost.

To go back to Mary's *female* experience (filling a lack in an almost all-male Trinity?) her role is absolutely indispensable in bringing us Jesus **the revealer of God in human flesh** – God incarnate, *enfleshed*. Yet much Christian tradition has been hostile to our physical, fleshy bodies. How come? It seems the Church must have been influenced by various dualistic heresies or even pagan traditions that saw flesh and spirit as absolute enemies. St Augustine, with his particular hang-ups (to cut a very long story short!) reinforced this hostility to the body. *Why?* – when in Jesus we see a bodily person, who got hungry and thirsty, tired and angry, who wept, who needed time away from the crowds on his own, who loved company and enjoyed parties and drank wine – why this hostility, when it's in the bodily Jesus that we find *the* image of God, of God's very self, in a way we humans can relate to? And when we ourselves, and one another, share the same flesh as Christ – as this sacrament reminds us.

True, these God-given bodies *are* in one sense only dust: they must not rule us unchecked; they come and they go. Yet in another sense they are temples of the Holy Spirit: the mouthpiece and eyes and hands of the living Christ. Our amazing bodies have, not only their mortal frailty, but also their own learnt knowledge and their deep wisdom, to complement our mental intellects with their sharp focus but often narrow vision. A bit like the balance between 'thinking fast and slow', instinct, emotion with reason. (Thank you, Daniel Kahneman.)

We are about to celebrate the great festival of the Incarnation – of God-made-flesh. Can I share something very personal, as just one small example of a God-given gift through the body's silent wisdom? I've learnt to practice a process of 'focusing' on what our bodies are trying to tell us, or need from us. It's best done with a trained partner.

It was shortly after Christina's worrying symptoms had finally been diagnosed as motor neurone disease, and likely to be the fast kind – measured in months not years. I was feeling I hardly dared get in touch with my emotions; but instead, settling to be aware of my physical presence was calming. I found myself sitting with hands on my knees, palms turned upward, and an odd feeling started in the palms. Gradually it became as though a round thing, a bit like a croquet ball, was in each hand, but getting heavier and heavier – more like a big cannon ball. I told my partner this, who asked if I was OK to stay with that feeling. The heaviness got so strong I was wondering how I could bear these weights, let alone carry them, but I hung on. And suddenly I *knew* – not in words, not told from outside, but simply *knew in my whole self*: these weights were a *gift*, not only a burden but a gift, as precious as it was burdensome. And so it was.

This was a deeply spiritual message, told me by my body's wisdom, in a way that I could accept, must accept, and stayed and strengthened me when all the comforting theories and pious words had become dried-up husks, in the face of my beloved's desperate helplessness. When we give ourselves space to listen, may we learn not only to hush the noise to hear the angels sing, but also to hear a language that angels are not privileged to share, but Jesus does – the whispered wisdom from the depths of our embodied being.