

Sermon: Christmas Day

*The holly bears a berry,
As red as any blood,
And Mary bore sweet Jesus Christ,
For to do poor sinners good*

As a schoolteacher and a parent, I've been to more than my share of nativity plays over the years. The infants do a grand job. What puzzles me though is that the biggest part is the innkeeper – though there's no innkeeper in the gospels. Still, there is an inn and so I suppose there must be an innkeeper. I've noticed too that he's always given a wife. These days I suspect it would have to be a same sex partner with whom he's just celebrated his civil partnership.

And of course, Joseph tells the innkeeper that they need a room because his wife is pregnant. And the innkeeper says, "So your wife is pregnant – that's not my fault!"

And Joseph replies, *It's not my fault either!*

On this Christmas Day we should be thankful for the contribution made by Joseph and Mary to our salvation. Again in the infants' nativity play, Mary is usually given a speaking part and made to say, *I'm going to have a baby!*

And there's not a dry eye in the school hall. Mothers and das are touched by this little interjection. And what seems to be conjured up is a nice pram and disposable nappies and everybody having a chance to cuddle the darling sprog. And a great sigh of *Aah!* goes up throughout that school hall.

What really happened was quite different. The Angel Gabriel did not say to Mary, as if addressing the nativity play, *Guess what, Mary – you're going to have bay-bee. And you can take pics of him on your mobile and send them all over the world by email!*

According to St Luke's gospel. St Luke was a friend of the family and he wrote not long after the event. According to St Luke, the Angel Gabriel said, *Hail thou that art highly favoured. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women.* He said it not in Latin but in Aramaic and several centuries before the Roman Church got properly established.

And Mary said, *Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it unto me according to thy word.*

This is where the holly berry and the blood come in. Have you noticed how many of our Christmas Carols contain prophecies of Good Friday – as red as any blood? And if you look at some of the great paintings of the Annunciation, you see Mary sitting in a house and through the window there is a hillside and three crosses on it.

She was not *just having a baby*. She knew what she was letting herself in for that girl. Her role in life was not concealed from her by the angel. It was revealed. She was to bear the Son who would die for the sins of the whole world.

This is why we say, *Blessed art thou among women.*

But we mustn't imagine either some dreadful contract between the stern God and this holy teenager. What we have in the Annunciation and the Virgin Birth is the astonishing story of God's matey collusion with humankind to put things right. This was no rape. The Holy Ghost was in cahoots with the Blessed Virgin – for us men and for our salvation.

It is the miracle of the intertwining of the divine and human natures. It is the union betwixt God and mankind, divinity and humanity. It is the mightiest thing that happened after the creation of the world. In fact it is a new creation. As St John starts his gospel, *In the beginning...* And here it is, this mighty thing, the Incarnation – and it is playful.

It beggars belief. Not that God could arrange a Virgin Birth. He'd done something almost as surprising before in providing a son for Abraham's wife in her old age. No, the astonishing, wondrous thing is that as the remedy for Original Sin and the cure of all our woe, God should choose to do the necessary not through some serenely pompous tribunal with the Lord Mayor of Jerusalem in attendance – but through this little slip of a Jewish with the ordinary Jewish name; and her husband Joseph who warrants a speaking part only in the school nativity.

You want to save the world? What would you do – a globalisation conference in Korea, a general assembly of the United Nations? When God wants to save the world he consults a Jewish teenager in an obscure village in Galilee

As the great Tertullian said, *Certum est, quia impossibile est. It is certain because it is impossible.* The difference between a contradiction and a paradox of glory is the divine interposition

What went on in Mary's head and heart that day then? There is a magnificent poem by that sardonic old drunk from the New York Algonquin Club. This is what Mrs Dorothy Parker says:

*The things she knew, let her forget again –
The voices in the sky, the fear, the cold,
The gaping shepherds and the strange old men
Piling their clumsy gifts of foreign gold.
Let her have laughter with her little one:
Teach her the endless, tuneless songs to sing;
Grant her the right to whisper to her son
The foolish names one dare not call a King.
Keep from her dreams the rumble of a crowd,
The smell of rough-cut wood, the trail of red,
The thick and chilly whiteness of the shroud
That wraps the strange new body of the dead.
Ah, let her go, kind Lord, where mothers go
And boast his pretty words and ways, and plan
The proud and happy years that they shall know*

Together, when her son is grown a man.

May God bless you all this Christmas day.