

2024: Midnight Service ONLINE – ‘In the beginning’ (John 1:1)

Let me begin with a question: when does the Christmas story start?

At the manger, when Jesus is born? When Caesar Augustus announces the census which takes the young couple Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem? When the angel Gabriel visits Mary 9 months previously? Or a few months before that still, when the angel visits Zechariah?

You could argue that it starts at Pentecost, when the church is born, and people suddenly start to mark the events surrounding Jesus' life. Cynics would argue that it only started in the 4th century as the spreading church Christianised the pagan gift-giving festivals in winter in the various Saxon cultures they met as they evangelised Western Europe.

Scholars might argue that it starts well before the angel Gabriel and Caesar Augustus. The OT prophets declared that God would send a special rescuer centuries before Jesus arrived. Isaiah, Micah, Ezekiel: many, many references that God was going to do something, send someone.

You could go back further still: God spoke to King David c.1000BC about a descendant who would rule forever, and David mentioned it in his Psalms....

Good answers, many answers: but they'd all be wrong. St John gives us the real answer, the first 3 words of his gospel: **In the beginning.... (the beginning)**

Begin at the very beginning, that's a very good place to start, as Maria von Trapp quite sensibly reminded us. But for us the beginning is not Bethlehem, or Nazareth, or Pentecost or Isaiah or even King David. 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' Jesus is not God's plan B or C or F or whatever plan God decided on about 0BC. Jesus was always plan A. God himself, co-existent with the Father and the Son, co-eternal, equal in glory and status: God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, as the old creed puts it.

In the beginning God made the heavens and the earth. The first words of the bible. God there is plural – why? Nobody knew at the time. But St John has worked it out: God is love. How does God love before he has a creation to love? It means God must have relationship within himself: Father, Son and Spirit in an eternal mutual relationship of love. It's beautiful when you think about it.

In the beginning, love: God in relationship with himself. Creation was made in love, for others to share it with him. Us. Humans – formed from the dust of the earth, yet carrying the image of God. So we too have that special capacity for relationship. Think about that when you're sharing out all your Christmas presents this weekend. When Uncle John gets his annual Old Spice deodorant and talcum powder set, a gift given in love at no benefit to yourself: you're bearing the image of God. When you laugh at Gran's unfunny cracker jokes, you bear the image of God. When your relative is rude about the food and it really hurts, you bear the image of God too – why? Because you were made to relate, and so you hurt when relationships are fractured.

In the beginning, Eden: God and us in harmony, us and the world in harmony. Life as God meant it. But it didn't last. We didn't want God's image. We wanted his place. 'You will be like God, knowing good and evil.' The serpent's lie, our greedy heart. The beginning broken. Relationships fractured. The image of God scarred. A rescuer required. A plan proclaimed: through Noah, then Abraham, then Moses, then Joshua, then David... again and again. 'I will be your God and you will be my people.' Where are you? Come home.....

In the beginning: the answer. God who is relationship, God who walked with Adam and Eve in the cool of the day, who came in power upon the great figures of the OT, who walked in the pillar of cloud with the Israelites, would definitively come to His world, would act to restore the image of His which was scarred and damaged. He would be human to represent us, and God to restore us. He would bear *our* image, so we could bear *his*. 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.'

'In the beginning' became 'in the world.' Verse 10: 'He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him.' Did they then? Do you now? Do I? Who is this child lying in the animals' feeding trough, visited by the hard men and the foreign stargazers? Plan B? A good man wrongly interpreted? A great man mythologised? A failed revolutionary? A prophet preacher with a gift for the soundbite? A charlatan? A fairy story? God himself? The beginning made flesh?

When does the story begin? When does it end? When you go to bed tomorrow? When the last relatives leave? When the decorations go down? When you go back to work? When you check your bank balance early in the new year? When an innocent man dies on a cross? When he comes back to life? When his friends declare his divine nature and capacity to forgive? When he comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead?

'I wish it could be Christmas every day.' Roy Wood sang that 40 or so years ago, and we play it every year. There is a man who has Christmas lunch every day, has done for 14 years. He lives in Leicestershire somewhere (probably alone). We laugh, but he's on to something. Christmas properly understood, is our beginning, middle and end. The Word became flesh, and moved into the neighbourhood. God dwells with his people: he lives in my heart and in the heart of every follower of his, everyone who asks him to. *It can be Christmas every day.* The true meaning of it doesn't have to end. We can throw the wrapping away, but the gift endures. Doh ray me far so lah tee, which will bring us back to....

In the beginning, life and love. In the nativity, life and love. In Christ, life and love. In the end.... well, that's the choice God leaves with each one of us. Where does your beginning end?