

Sermon 31 December 2023

Waiting is difficult. Patience is required. As children, on Christmas Day, we had to wait for the grandparents to arrive before any opening of the gifts. And it seemed to simply take ages! Well, at least until late morning. We didn't quite live rurally, but almost and the grandparents came from the city. At last, they had arrived. There was a routine, those of us who could, sat on the floor with the adults seated around. Mum had the task of handing out the gifts. That too, seemed to take ages! The traditional Christmas lunch followed. The oldest of the relatives then found time to doze on either ends of the couch (to the great amusement of us as children).

So, when did you begin planning for Christmas day? How long ago? Was it months, weeks, or days before? It may have begun with the planning of the gifts to be bought, the menu for the day or putting up the Christmas tree.

Then on the evening of, or at bedtime on Christmas day, perhaps you thought, yah it is all over for another year! But it wasn't over... it had just begun in fact. It is New Year's Eve, and the tree is still up. The nativity scene remains in place. Baby Jesus is in the manger.

Is it now too late to say, "Merry Christmas?" People come up and say: "Did you have a nice Christmas?" Right away, that implies that Christmas is in the past. Now we pack up and put away Christmas Day on Boxing Day as it is done for this year. No, not yet. As many of us know, there are twelve days of Christmas, and the season of Christmas continues today. So, when we see each other today, we say, "Merry Christmas and a happy new year." On this New Year's Eve, we say, "Merry Christmas and a happy new year." We have a few more days yet to enjoy saying "Merry Christmas" to each other. Believe it or not, we have a few more days to enjoy singing Christmas carols and Christmas hymns. We might not even like to think of it like this!! The hype leading up to Christmas is over. Christmas day, with its delights and nightmares is over. We may have stayed up late to attend the Christmas Eve service or to see Christmas day begin and today we are thinking about staying up late to see the New Year in (or not, in my case... well, once upon a time but not anymore).

Today we remember that Simeon was an old man. He was an old man, waiting to see the Messiah. He didn't see any miracles; he didn't see any signs; he didn't see any wonders. He simply saw the baby Jesus and he said, "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation which has been prepared for all people. No miracles. No signs. No wonders. He just saw the Christ child, he believed and that was enough. Simeon didn't need the extraordinary to believe, he simply needed to see the Christ child.

Then we have the story of an elderly Anna, who was eighty-four years old. She was a widow and had been poor for a long time. For her also, there were no miracles, no signs, no wonders. All she saw was the Christ child and she too believed. We might think, well, as simple as that. What do we look for in the Christ child? Do we see the Christ child in the ordinary or do we expect something more extra ordinary??

"At the end of the eight days when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. And when the time came for the purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord and to offer a sacrifice according to that which is said in the law, a pair of turtle doves and two young pigeons." Rituals went with the occasion.

Jesus was real, a real live baby, and Jesus also went through the rituals of his babyhood, just like we go through babyhood rituals. There were at least three rituals to Jesus' infancy at eight days, another at thirty-one days; and another at forty days. There were the rituals of Jesus' childhood.

At thirty-one days old, if it was a normal process, he would have been brought to the temple in Jerusalem for the service of dedication. This is a second big trip up to Jerusalem on the thirty-first day. Because it was the first-born male. In a patriarchal society, it was a special position to be the first-born male. Jesus was the first born male and he would have gone through that ritual of dedication. So, there was a childhood ritual at thirty-one days.

There was a third ritual of childhood, and this ritual had to do with Mary. It was called the rite of purification (the purification period after the birth of a male child lasted 40 days). Not for the baby but for the mother. Mary needed to be purified. If she had given

birth to a boy, she was to stay at home for forty days and not come out of the house. If she gave birth to a girl, she was to remain at home for eighty days. If a mother gave birth to a daughter, she was to remain home for twice as long. According to the Jewish law, Mary was to come to the synagogue on the fortieth day. The law told her to offer a sacrifice of a lamb or if she could not afford a lamb, she was to offer two turtle doves or two pigeons. She sacrifices two turtle doves or two pigeons and this indicates that Jesus was raised in a poor family.

So, we find events surround Jesus' eighth day, thirty-first day, and fortieth day. Jesus went through his cultural traditions just as we go through our own.

The reason that we are spending so much time thinking about these rituals of Jesus' childhood is to emphasize that Jesus was fully human, that he was fully a child. These rituals emphasise Jesus' humanity. The epistle reading for today from Galatians tells us that Jesus was born under the law and that he was to conform to the requirements of the law. Matthew chapter 3 tells us that Jesus was to fulfil the obligations of the law: circumcision, dedication, and purification. Luke chapter 2 says that Jesus was to fulfil the obligations of the law. Romans says that Jesus came in the likeness of our flesh. Philippians says that Jesus was in the likeness of a human being. All these Biblical passages and the message of Christmas is that Jesus was a real, live, flesh and blood human being like us.

The humanity of Jesus has often been a sticking point for some Christians. The incarnation: God coming fully as a human being has been a sticking point for believers. Some people want Jesus to be an extra-ordinary baby and not just a baby. Then they want him to grow up to be an out of the ordinary child and not just a child. Then they want him to grow up to be a super-human and not just a man. And then, they want him to be a super god who has a magic wand of a fairy godmother and not be the true God of the Bible.

We do not allow Jesus to be fully a human being. Bone of our bone. Flesh of our flesh. Emotion of our emotion. Skin of our skin. There is the idea that Jesus had a human body but inside of his human body, Jesus was *pure God*. In other words. he had flesh that was human, but inside those bones and mind and emotions, it was pure divinity.

Jesus had an outer shell of a human being, but inside, he was totally divine. In other words, Jesus was not fully a human being.

We know that Jesus was the son of a carpenter, and we rightly assume that Jesus had carpenter's skills. However, I have the suspicion that many of you think that when Jesus pounded a nail, the nails all went into the wood straight. Or, when Jesus missed the nail and hit his finger, he said "O my." Or, when he hit his finger with his hammer, it didn't even hurt. And when Jesus came to worship in the synagogue, he always sat perfectly still. He wanted to go to the synagogue every Sunday with his parents. Why? Because many of us don't believe that Jesus was a real human being like you and me. That Jesus didn't have normal feelings of humanity like us. Jesus was a super baby and not a real baby.

What is a super baby? I know what a super baby is. A super baby never whines, never cries, never vomits, never soils himself, never disappoints his parents, and always sits perfectly still through the entire worship service in the synagogue. That's what a super baby is. We often want Jesus to be a super baby rather than a real, live, normal baby like the ones we enjoy here at St Peters.

So, we lose the paradox that Jesus was true God and true man. During the season of Christmas and these twelve days of Christmas, we celebrate the fact that Jesus was truly human. Jesus was like bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, mind of our mind, emotions of our emotions and skin of our skin. This child was a real human being.

Why is it so important to emphasise the humanity of Jesus? Because the humanity of Jesus emphasises for us the humanity of God. Talking about the humanity of Jesus gives us a clue about the humanity of God. That God comes to us in very plain and ordinary ways. Through the waters of baptism; through the words of the Bible; through the bread and wine of Holy Communion. God comes to us through ordinary people like us. We discover that God comes to us through ordinary people like us, our spouse, our children, our friends, our family, our work colleagues. *God uses plain and ordinary flesh and blood people like us to get the job done, to get his message across to and through us. That is the message of Christmas.* God comes through the plain and ordinary, the fully human person like baby Jesus. God was born to a plain and ordinary girl. He was born in a stable, in a manger full of straw, with the smell of real, live

animals in the barn. *God chose the common and the natural, the humble and the ordinary, to express his love to us.*

Our problem is that often we don't want God to do that, to come to us through the ordinary ways. We want God to come to us through extra-ordinary means. The ordinary isn't enough for us. We don't want natural miracles; we want supernatural magic. We don't want miracles worked through nature; we want magic that violates the laws of nature. We don't want natural messengers called friends; we want supernatural messengers called angels with wings and halos. We don't want God to work through the ordinary; we want God to work through the unbelievably extraordinary. We don't want Jesus to be a human baby; we want him to be a super baby.

There are people who believe that God is more present in the sanctuary than God is present with us at the factory or in the office or in the local school. We believe that God is more present here in church. In church, we feel the presence of God, but we don't see and feel the presence of God in the faces of people with whom we work. Or many of us would rather have warm feelings of fuzzy inspiration inside than the flesh and blood of our husband or wife, our brother or sister, or the starving children of the world. We would prefer to see God in our warm fuzzy feelings than in the eyes of the poor the starving and the marginalised. And if we cannot see the face of God in the flesh and blood of the people of the world that are surrounding us, then we cannot see the face of God at all.

The message of Christmas is that God likes flesh and blood and skin and bones and emotions and that he continues to come to us in those ways. The humanity of Jesus is a clue to the humanity of God.

Simeon and Anna came to the temple that day. Two common and ordinary people. They brought the baby to them. There were no miracles, no signs, no wonders. All they did was to look at the baby and they believed. That is what Christmas is all about: Christ comes to us as a real, live human baby. The child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him. How will the child Jesus influence our faith in 2024, particularly in this challenging world we live in? Amen.

