

## Christmas Morning

At Christmas time our churches are filled with people who perhaps do not come to church that often during the rest of the year. Unfortunately, many preachers take the opportunity to harangue these infrequent church attendees in an effort to force them to come more often. If you are an infrequent attender, fear not! I'm not going to harangue you this Christmas, but rather try to nurture and encourage you.

You see, after previous population censuses, particularly in the UK, it was found that some 78% of the population claimed they were Christian. Now, if any of you have been to churches in the UK you will not find anywhere near 78% of the population attending church. Because of this in 1994, the religious sociologist Grace Davie wrote an influential book, *Religion in Britain since 1945*, subtitled *Believing without belonging*. It had this subtitle because Davie believed those 78% believed in God and Jesus but were not able to commit themselves to belong to a church.

In a recent article in the *Church Times* Alan Billing suggested that in fact it is the opposite way round, they belong without believing. You are here this Christmas Day because you do belong – that is why you are here, but perhaps you are struggling with what you are called upon to believe as a Christian. Thus it must become the Church's task to nurture your faith. And that is what I hope to do in this Christmas sermon.

However, the Church doesn't make it easy. In the Book of Common Prayer of 1662 which will celebrate its 350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary next year, it says that Anglicans should receive communion at least three times a year, of which Easter should be one. Usually Christmas is one of the others. Now, all of us would have no trouble in accepting the belief in the ethical standards that Jesus set in the Sermon on the Mount, for example. Nor would we doubt that loving God and loving our neighbour is what we are called to do. We all accept the response of the loving father in the parable of the prodigal son and we accept that it is right to behave as the Samaritan in the parable of the Good Samaritan by helping those in need. We can accept it as the right thing to do even if we might battle to actual do it ourselves.

On the other hand Christmas is when we are called to acknowledge that God became a human being, born of a human mother. Can our faith, our belief accept that as easily? That is what I trying to convince you of today.

Did God become a human? John's famous preface to his Gospel which is our Gospel reading this morning says it clearly: *And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

All too often we see Jesus as divine but not necessary as human. Mary is always pictured wearing a beautiful blue robe. Let me assure you that that baby in the manger is so human that that blue robe has white stains of burped milk on it. That baby in the manger, like all new born babies, had no control over its bladder or its bowels. That baby, and even in fact the man who grew up from that baby, was completely and thoroughly human, and yet also divine.

We all know the carol, *Away in the Manger* but some say that it contains a heresy in verse two. *The cattle are lowing, the Baby awakes, // But little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes;* This is viewed as a heresy because it implies that the Baby Jesus was so good and perfect that he never cried. This verse, they say, is denying the humanity of Jesus and Jesus was fully human.

But how does that affect us? St Athanasius summed it up when he said: "God became man so that men might become gods." It is the ultimate aim of all Christian believers to become more like God, more like what God created us to be. And the example we have of what God wants us to be like, is demonstrated in that baby lying in the manger at Bethlehem.

So how do we become more like Jesus? Firstly, we have to know more about him. And that we do that through reading about his life and teaching in the Gospels. Perhaps you might find that Jesus' teaching is hard for you to follow. This is where the Church is here to help you. The Church helps you by its teaching, by its encouragement, by its modelling Christ in its own behaviour.

Then, secondly having learnt more about Christ and desiring to behave like him, we need to be given strength to do so by God's grace. This strength comes through the grace of the sacraments, in particular the sacrament of the Eucharist. When received regularly, this sacrament will feed us spiritually, building us up in our faith.

Perhaps the most difficult Christian theologies for us to accept are the theologies around Christmas and Easter – that God was born in human form as a baby in Bethlehem – that this baby grew up to be fully a human man who died on the cross and yet rose again from the dead. These are the two essential beliefs which make Christianity. Perhaps these are the two beliefs many of you battle over. If so, you are not alone. Only last week David Cameron, the UK Prime Minister, speaking in Oxford said that he was a committed but “vaguely practising” Church of England Christian who was “full of doubts” about big theological issues.

For me the poet, John Betjeman summed both the concept of why we should come to Church on Christmas and also the understanding of the human divine nature of Christ in his poem *Christmas*

And is it true,  
This most tremendous tale of all,  
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,  
A Baby in an ox's stall?  
The Maker of the stars and sea  
Become a Child on earth for me?

And is it true? For if it is,  
No loving fingers tying strings  
Around those tissued fripperies,  
The sweet and silly Christmas things,  
Bath salts and inexpensive scent  
And hideous tie so kindly meant,

No love that in a family dwells,  
No carolling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells  
Can with this single Truth compare -  
That God was man in Palestine  
And lives today in Bread and Wine.