The Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ
2021, 8.30 Holy Communion & 10am Choral Eucharist

We all love a birthday party.

But, I sat in these quire stalls the other night, wallowing in the beauty of IX Lessons & Carols, and the thought struck me, ‘why do Christians make such a big deal of the birth of Jesus?’

Perhaps, you might be thinking, with some justification, the years of formation and study for priesthood, or the Christmases up until now, might have prompted me to given it a second thought, but there we are.

Apart from the fact that we all love a Birthday Party – balloons, Colin the Caterpillar cakes, gifts – why is the birthday of Jesus the second most important feast of the year, and for many more of a fuss than even Easter. Easter is the days of our salvation – Christ goes through death to defeat death, and open the door to everlasting life.

Pentecost – the gift of God the Holy Spirit to be with us now: in the Sacraments of the Church, in human love and community, in the Bible and all the other ways God is with us now.
But no, the *birthday* of Jesus. Did the Egyptians celebrate the birthdays of their Gods? Do Hindu traditions? Did the Aztecs? What a strange thing to do, when you think about it.

The other thing that has really struck me this year are the words of carols. Because we couldn’t sing last year, carols have really grabbed me this year, in a new way. I don’t know if something similar has happened to you?

A few weeks ago we gathered with teachers from our school and members of the congregation and unsuspecting drinkers in a pub off the High Street one Friday night and sang carols. It was relaxed and noisy and rather glorious, actually. And as we sang, over-priced Marylebone pints in hand, the words of the carols hit me like a freight train. Their beauty, and profundity and challenge. These words carry ancient tradition, hard and knitty-gritty theology, and mysterious numinous truth, and, somehow, they place all that deeply in our affections and hearts, and have them trip off our tongues with joy.

So perhaps the carols can help us get some kind of answer as to why we’re all here, at this birthday party.
[10am We sang ‘Adeste Fidelis’ as we came in.] Those glorious lines well beyond the ken of any modern pop lyricist: ‘very God, Begotten not created’. ‘abhoring not the virgin’s womb’. Absurd and glorious words to set to music when you think about it!

And yet, they plunge us straight to our first revelation: that this is indeed Jesus’ birthday party, God’s birthday party, but that is not to say Jesus didn’t exist until His birth. Begotten of the Father, from the Godhead, but not newly created at His incarnation. The eternal ‘Word made flesh’. The Greek Logos poorly translated as ‘word’ better put as ‘purpose’, ‘meaning’. God’s eternal meaning ‘Born this happy morning’, ‘Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing’. By a miraculous gift of a virgin mother – an oxymoron to fulfil ancient prophesy.

Our second revelation is these paradoxes. An oxymoron: the hallmark that God is doing this. A virgin-mother will bear a God-man

who

by dying will defeat death
and secure eternal life. Paradox and contradiction are at the heart of the Christian story, and at the heart of God’s action among us.

A brief sojourn back to the pub… in mid-December our informal philosophy and theology discussion ‘Veritas et Vino’ met in the King’s Head (the house incidentally of Charles Wesley who wrote Hark the Herald Angels Sing, amongst other things…) A young lawyer in our congregation led our conversation on that occasion. He brought his passion for Marylebone resident TS Eliot, and helped connect Eliot’s magnificent Four Quartets with the writings of some great modern philosophers. The theme that emerged for us was one of knowing and not knowing. Eliot’s four poems unfold so much of the human experience. The beauty and loveliness, the shame and fear and baser things, the chaos and confusion of being alive (something none of us have avoided in these COVID years). Eliot uncovers what being human actually feels like, looks like, is like; and the greater story in which we do all that living. It was put to us, that Eliot presents life as a conversation of knowing and not knowing, that the business of being human is living in that space. By doing life we find and discover, but we also realise how little we have found.
In terms of faith, we get out of bed every Sunday morning to share in the Eucharist, sing, pray, hear the Scriptures, participate in ritual and liturgy (and by participating in these Holy Mysteries we are becoming more human, more alive) but we never know or possess the realities in which we participate. We never comprehend, never surround these truths. If we stop, we have given up on the deep business of being human, of seeking to live authentically with how ever many years we have on earth, but we do not kid ourselves that we ever grasp the fullness of the thing. We do these things and are transformed by doing them, but we do not possess the limits of the horizon.

The paradox and contradiction of a life spent knowing and not knowing, of a revelation in Jesus, that is mystery revealed. As the carol says ‘A

heavenly

babe’?

in ‘While Shepherd’s Watched’. A glorious God, wrapped in swaddling bands, who can only sleep and feed and fill His nappy. The birth of Jesus is so worthy of a party because of the absurd and universe-changing reality of the birth of God.
That’s why we celebrate. That’s why we’re here. That’s what we sing. That is our outrageous hope.

‘Incarnate’ – carne, flesh, as in chilli con carne – ‘Hail the Incarnate Deity!’

writes Wesley. Born that man no more may die, but through our Baptism and ongoing relationship with God have ‘second birth’, we’ll sing, to new and eternal life. By His love, (and no other means) to be made ‘fit’ for heaven and ‘live’ with Him ‘there’, we’ll sing, forever.

As we sing these hymns, hear the familiar Bible readings from [10am] St Titus and St Luke / [8.30am] the Epistle to the Hebrews and St John, let’s not confuse familiarity for sugary niceness. These are infuriating, wonderful, provoking, and magnificent works of theology, poetry and truth. We are invited today, and every Sunday and weekday of the year ahead, to suppress our need to know better, to force ourselves and this world into the banal little boxes we reduce life to, and to behold a glorious mystery,

and step in inside.