

Christmas 2017

Merry Christmas everyone! I wonder, what are you hungry for this Christmas? I don't mean the turkey and all the trimmings, or a delicious vegetarian alternative, or even sugar plums and Christmas candy. What are you hungry for in the depth of your self? What is the emptiness that you long to see filled? Are you hungry for security in a time when the world seems wildly awry? Are you hungry for peace in a world that is constantly at war? Are you hungry for truth in a culture of misdirection and fake news? Are you hungry for connection in a city full of lonely individuals? What is your hunger this Christmas 2017?

I love this season of feasting and celebration, of lights and tinsel and glitter and gifts – even in my 50s, when I should, you'd think, be thoroughly and completely adult, I still wake up on Christmas morning with a sense of excitement and wonder! But if this season isn't able to answer some of our true human hungers then it isn't really worth the love and energy it receives. If it's just a pretty story for children or a winsome theological concept for church geeks then there's no meat to the feast. But if it does indeed contain food for our most haunting emptinesses then it might just be worth all the glitz that surrounds it.

Let's remind ourselves of that pretty story and that winsome theological concept. A young working-class woman gives birth in the dirty surroundings of a stable with her husband by her side, though he's not the baby's father. They have had to travel hard because of orders from an uncaring government and found no one willing to give them a decent lodging when they arrived. So far so sadly everyday. But then the shepherds, the local rednecks, hear voices and see the first Christmas lights so come to find out what's going on. And angels, messengers of the divine, start the first Christmas singalong. And we are given to understand that rather than the everyday we're in the presence of the one-off: God born as a helpless baby in the middle of a poor and occupied country about 2000 years ago.

God, I love this story! Not because it's pretty - it's actually fairly grim - but because it speaks truth to the human heart. In particular because it speaks truth - striking, sparkling, glittery truth - about the worth of every single human ever born into this wonderful and weary world. Listen again to that verse from our gospel, try and hear it as if it's fresh - after all it's short enough to be the latest tweet: 'God became flesh and dwelt among us.'

God - not the easiest word to get our heads around - in fact, by definition, the hardest word of all to get our heads around. God - the divine creator, the ground of all being, the source of all love and light, completely beyond everything you see and yet deep within everything you see - that God gave up the painless safety of divine transcendence and became one of us. Became flesh. Became subject to all the things that are beyond human control: loss and physical pain and death and helpless giggling and fear and hope and other people's bad decisions.

And it certainly feels like we've all been subject to other people's bad decisions this year! That the hunger in our hearts for justice and peace has got deeper as we've seen more of our sisters and brothers subjected to harassment and oppression. Christmas reminds us of the value of all people - of the refugee and DACA student, of the single mother facing the loss of health care for her family, of the black boy afraid to catch the eye of a police officer, of the girl too afraid to add her name to the metoo hashtag. Christmas reminds us that God became our flesh, became one of us - one of the poorest and most vulnerable and most oppressed - so that none of us should forget the overwhelming value of every single human life.

Christmas isn't some spiritual feast meant only for religious people and detached from real life. Christmas is the most human of holy days. It's the day when we all get to be reminded how deeply valuable and how deeply loved each one of us is. That's why it's so painfully ridiculous when people get upset over someone saying 'happy holidays' rather than 'Merry Christmas' - every greeting that celebrates our connection with another person is right and appropriate for this holy time of year. Every greeting that wishes well to another irreplaceable invaluable human being should be a cause of delight not dismay!

The value given to humanity by God becoming human is the meat of Christmas, the way that Christmas can answer some of those fundamental human hungers – though only with our help. Are you hungry for peace? Then let the peace of the Christ child live in your actions and your relationships as well as in your heart. Are you hungry for truth? Then let the fundamental truth of the deep worth of very human being keep you alert to all lies that would tell you otherwise. Are you hungry for connection? Then be the one to reach out with a greeting, whatever it is, knowing that the person you reach out to is infinitely beloved by God, as you are yourself.

Are you hungry for security? Ah. Yes. Sorry. That's not a hunger that Christmas can fill. Christmas is the opposite of secure. It's full of wonder and risk and good news and joy and hilarity but not security. It's all about God becoming vulnerable, giving up divine security, being ridiculously born to a poor family in an obscure part of the world. It's all about being loved and loving others – not being safe but being out there – building peace, connecting with strangers, speaking truth to power. The good news of Christmas is peace, connection, truth and love – but not security.

I've talked enough at you for one Christmas morning! It's now time to move on to the places where we are literally fed: to this altar table where we share the essence of God's love in bread and wine. To our own home tables where we share a sense of celebration and of shared humanity. Feast this year on all the good things Christmas can offer. Merry Christmas! Happy Holidays! And may the peace, connection, truth and love of Christmas live with us all throughout 2018.