

GOD IS WITH US

Well, here we are again. Another Christmas. I hope you will all have a rummage in your stockings when you awake - not before you go to bed, although a glass of port and mince pie is permissible. And do remember to say thank you for all those lovely calorie free chocolates.

And talking of giving thanks - that is really what I want to think about tonight. As you are all good Christian boys and girls, or good Christian men and women, and you come here *fairly* regularly, Sunday by Sunday, year by year, I am not going to re-tell the Christmas story. We have had lovely Christingle services at the start of the month, and then there was a riotous crib service earlier on. Now we can see the story portrayed with the Holy Family round the manger.

There is a great danger of telling the story of Christmas in a way that makes it twee. My mother used to tell the story to the Sunday School, called "The Littlest Camel". She showed pictures - It wasn't quite a magic lantern show but it was a film strip. Nice, I suppose, but Oh, so twee.

And our Western Culture has gone bananas of Christmas symbols - We have Christmas cards with Robins on - none where Jesus was born; we show lots of pictures with the snow - which reminds me, what was King Wenceslas's favourite meal - Pizza - Deep pan, crisp and even. Snow - there wasn't any snow at that time of year near Bethlehem. Holly - none, ivy - none. Christmas trees - none - in fact hardly any trees at all except the occasional olives and palm trees. And of course, no one knew about Father Christmas. No reindeer.

So you see - we dress up the Christmas story with so much extra stuff that we lose sight of the heart of it. And we totally miss the gob-smacking wonder of it. And we smother it with food and shopping - and we totally lose the mystery and the amazement of it.

Of course, it is *nice* to have all these other aspects of Christmas that have become traditional - but tonight I want to look at the truth of the Christmas

story that St John tells us.

One thing that we are clearly told in the gospels was that Jesus was born as a baby, and that there were signs in the heavens that heralded his birth - all these signs said that this baby was special. **Hang a star over the edge of the pulpit!**

There are two books in the bible that start with the words "In the beginning". Who can tell me what they are? Genesis and John.

Genesis 1:1-6

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was empty, a formless mass cloaked in darkness. And the Spirit of God was hovering over its surface. Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that it was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day" and the darkness "night." Together these made up one day.

That's right. We are here today because God created the heavens and the earth. We now know that God did this 15 billion years ago - or so!

Now, when we go outside we can sometimes see a star. Even in the day time. Yes - which is it. The sun. Well God isn't mean. God didn't just make one, star, he made galaxies of them. But we are really quite small in the scale of things. Our sun is a small one in the Galaxy we call the Milky Way. And there are 29 galaxies that astronomers can see 'near by'.

But most galaxies are invisible because they are too far away, and there are about a billion galaxies altogether. And each galaxy has about a billion stars or suns in it.

Yes, that's right, in the beginning God set off a process from the big explosive act of creation when God said simply: let it be! And a billion billion stars followed. Approximately - I haven't counted them. It is a huge number. *Unroll the number 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000* - AND we don't want any of those american billions - ours are British Billions - a million million. One, followed by 24 noughts.

The second book that begins 'In the beginning' we have just heard: John's gospel.

I In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was with God in the beginning. ³ Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.

Now St John tells us that In the beginning was the Word. Jesus was God's word. Nothing was made without him. He was instrumental in the creation of the billion billion stars. He was there with the Father. Nothing was made without his activity. Without Him - the Word of God - was not anything made that was made.

And yet, the word became flesh - and came to live with us. Just think of the difference. From being instrumental in creating galaxies, God allowed himself to become a very small brand new baby. That's why I have given you the small picture - to help you see the amazing truth of it.

John Donne, Dean of St Paul's before it burned down wrote this:

Ere by the spheres time was created thou
Wast in His mind, who is thy Son, and Brother ;
Whom thou conceivest, conceived ; yea, thou art now
Thy Maker's maker, and thy Father's mother,
Thou hast light in dark, and shutt'st in little room
Immensity, cloister'd in thy dear womb.

Immensity, cloister'd in thy dear womb.

I know I have quoted this last year, as you will all of course doubtless recall, but it says it so much better than I can. In fact I have put a copy on the back of the Christmas poster.

When my first child was born I could lie him on my forearm and his head would be in my hand and his feet would just reach to here. 22" long. Yet God became this. For you and me. If that isn't amazing - risky - fantastic, then I don't know what is.

Why? So that he could show us what God was like in a way that we could understand. So that God would feel what it was like to be us - human - little, insignificant on the great scale of things. When Jesus grew up he told us that all of these stars were created out of love - that you and I were created out of love, so that we too could love.

So you don't *need* all the extras that we have added on to Christmas - you don't *have* to have them. But do try and capture the wonder of a God who created on such a vast scale - and who came as a tiny baby to show us the real meaning of love. Immanuel - God with us. And tell every one else.



***That's the*
meaning of
Christmas**

WE WISH YOU A VERY
HAPPY AND PEACEFUL
CHRISTMAS