

# Sermon on Sunday 13 December 2020

## by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

*Readings: Isaiah 61. 1-4, 8-11; John 1. 6-8, 19-27*

### Nativity Play



You had a sermon about John the Baptist last week so I'm not going to give you another. But one message rings out loud and clear from the answers of John the Baptist to the questions of the Levites. It's not about me. **It's about Him!**

Now I'm going to tell you a story. I hope it will give some comfort in a year when many much-loved Christmas traditions have had to be rethought - but also some inspiration.

The incidents that make up this story are almost all true. But they didn't all happen at the same place, or at the same time.

Choosing the cast for the annual Sunday School nativity play had always been a problem. The older teachers spoke wistfully of the old days, when they had to choose a Mary, a Gabriel, a Joseph, an Innkeeper and three Kings from 40 enthusiastic children without upsetting any of them - or their parents. There were always plenty left over to be shepherds and angels.

But now the congregation was much smaller, and the problem was different. Finding enough children was the challenge. But by

calling in a few of the less regular families, and sundry friends and relations, they could just about struggle through. It had seemed a bit radical the first time they'd had to slip in a wise woman or two to cover all the solo verses in 'We three Kings', but nobody gives that a second thought now.

This year, at least they had a reliable Mary. Samantha was ten now, though she looked younger, and had played Mary before. But when Samantha was asked if she could again provide a suitable doll to play the part of Jesus, she indignantly replied that she was nearly ready for secondary school and had long since disposed of her doll collection to her numerous younger cousins.

Gillian overheard. Gillian was a first-time mother, rocking her little Gregory in his pram. He was about 4 months old. "Why can't Greg play Jesus!" cried Gillian. She only meant it as a joke, but Samantha yelped with delight at the idea and skipped off round the church hall telling everyone, "Gregory is going to play the doll this year!"... and so events took their unintended course.

The nativity play was part of the family service the Sunday before Christmas. There was a good turnout; all the regulars, various friends and family of the young performers, and a few other occasional worshippers.

When Mary and Joseph had been settled into their stable, a pram was wheeled out, cunningly disguised with cardboard and straw to look like a mobile manger. But only the Sunday School teachers, and children in the play, knew the secret about little Gregory, sleeping peacefully in his pram after a carefully timed feed. So, the watchers were surprised, even puzzled, as the play went on.

The angels, the shepherds and the wise men (and women) all duly arrived at the stable, spoke their stilted lines and put down their gifts. But instead of shuffling off to the back of the stage when they had said their part, and standing there looking bored as younger children usually do in nativity plays, or trying to spot their mum and dad in the audience, they all crowded closely

round the back of the manger, staring in fascination at its contents.

When, finally, little Greg let out a loud yawn and waved a little fist through the air, a gentle chorus of 'Ahhhhs' went through the congregation. The Christmas story had suddenly, literally, come to life.

When Jim, the pastor, was ready to give his short reflection after the play, he abandoned all he had prepared and simply told us what that little incident had shown him.

How often are we all like children in a nativity play? Shuffling on stage when the time is right on a Sunday morning, singing our hymns when we are supposed to, reciting our doctrines when it's our cue, sitting when it's time to sit, standing when it's time to stand, but missing out on the really exiting truth: 'The Word became flesh – became a human child – and lived among us'. All our creeds and doctrines and sacraments and liturgies are no more than the carefully rehearsed lines of child actors, unless that one man, Jesus, born in a stable in Bethlehem, is at their heart.

Like our Sunday School children, do we not also need to spend much more time simply gazing in amazement and wonder at our Lord Jesus, God made flesh? **It's all about Him.**

There's a second part to the story. We need to meet Greg's dad now. Adrian didn't mind Gillian coming to church but, really, God just didn't have a place in Adrian's world. He'd shown a bit of interest in church when he was courting Gillian – but then, she'd pretended to take an interest in football, and that had stopped pretty sharply once they were married. He had done the baptism preparation, and had got on well with Jim the pastor, but he didn't see religion as a man's thing.

But Adrian was a fiercely proud and caring young father, so this Sunday he was more than happy to come along and see his little son's stage debut. And all went fine, until the service was nearly over, and young Samantha innocently delved into the pram and

took Greg in her arms just as she had probably done with her doll three years before! Adrian shot up from his pew, raced down the centre aisle and grabbed his son. Like all first-time dads, he was very concerned for his son's safety, and seeing him in the hands of that tiny girl, with so many other excited children milling around, he just felt he had to go to the rescue.

No harm was done, apart from a bit of general embarrassment. Like I said, Samantha had a hatful of younger cousins, and was good with babies. But Adrian still felt he should apologise to Jim after the service. "Oh, don't worry", said Jim. "Now you know what it must have felt like for God. Trusting his firstborn son into the hands of human beings, exposing him to all the dangers and threats and risks of human life. It can't have been easy for Him. I wonder how often God looked down and thought, 'I can't let him go through all that, I must go and rescue him...'" But Adrian interrupted him, his face aglow with excitement: "You mean, God's a dad!" he exclaimed. "God's a dad, like me!"

And maybe for the first time, Adrian's world and God's world found a point of contact. 'God's a dad, like me.'

Amen