

United Benefice of Old Brampton and Great Barlow

Fr Stanley Monkhouse Sermon Archive

Year B – Advent - Lent

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Advent Sunday, Year B

Isaiah 64: 1-9

Psalm 80: 1-7: Stir up thy strength, O Lord.

1 Corinthians 1: 3-9

Luke 2: 22-40

Lovely time of year

Images: clouds, shoots sprouting

Mysticism, Mystical religion

What is this thing that is coming?

Theos

Divine

How do we recognise it?

Light is just about the best way. Light to lighten the dark corners, to flush out the dirt.

Let there be light – not overcome

Lantern of Christ will bleach them. Demons

that are enemies of our good selves

only so fighting are we adult fruitful happy (von Hügel) All life, according to [von Hügel] consists in a patient struggle with irreconcilables—a progressive unifying of parts that will never fit perfectly.

These enemies within are more dangerous than any external enemy because they inhibit my goodness within, often through guilt. I must love these enemies, love my demons,

Renewals require assessment of where you are

- self examination
- searingly honest
- hard work

Church – renewal. Examine every organisation of the church to ask how is it furthering the work of Christ. If we find it is simply existing for the comfort of a few, we should consider how it needs to be altered.

All this is a new start, a tidy up

Be alert, watch

Liturgy; we all watch and wait. Journey – east facing

And now: Celia

Advent 2 2005

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts resonate to your praise and glory, Lord, our strength and salvation.

Lovely advent etc
bunnies soft toys
Gold, frankincense and Taylor's port.

But hold on a minute
Jesus' message requires that we practice what he preached. This is difficult stuff
Advert on Channel 4 Provocative. Stimulating, Surprising. Disturbing. Unexpected.
All these words apply to Jesus' teaching.

If you follow me, you carry a cross.
The first will be last, the last first.
Wise as serpents and innocent as doves.
I have cast fire on the world, and see I am guarding it until it blazes.
I bring a sword.
Whoever does not hate his father and mother, sister and brother, cannot become a disciple.
Do not lend money at interest.
Love your enemies and pray for those that abuse you.

So where ever did we ever get the impression that Jesus was meek and mild. Christian children all mist me mild obedient good as he,

Living the Christian life is challenging, pursuing truth is difficult: think of the Mirfield fathers in South Africa, Bonhoeffer in Germany, Sin in the Philippines, Romero in wherever he was, the Methodists in the industrial revolution, the sum priests in the twentieth. thingie in Iraq, thingie in Liverpool

To live according to Christian teaching is to seek truth, not self-deception:

OT message
Truth can divide
Truth can hurt before it heals.
Truth produce hatred
Truth can leave a person standing alone
Truth can appear to fail before it succeeds

How do we do this?

Lord left no commands other than three
The Master left few specific instructions about devotional life. And he said nothing about how many times we should attend church, or break bread together, or what hymns should be sung, or indeed, and this may come as a shock to some, absolutely nothing about how the arrangement of the flowers. He gave us a few instructions about prayer – principally that it should be in private – and left us the Lord's prayer.

I'm not decrying words, liturgies and music – they are very important expressions of human needs when contemplating the ultimate being, and I share Pope Benedict's view that worship should lift us up to heaven, but I am saying that we should bear in mind the needs of the community when we approach these issues.

Our Lord, though left three very specific commands:

- You shall love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength.
You
- shall love your neighbour as yourself.
- Love – the new covenant demands nothing else. Love without self-sufficiency.
- eat and drink in remembrance of me

I put it to you that there is nothing else that matters. You shall love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength BY loving your neighbour as yourself.

And I don't just mean the church going community. How do we reach the unchurched. What impression would they get if they came in to one of our services? Would they get a taste of heaven or would they get an impression of an exclusive club with in-jokes, and inaudible mutterings? All utterly trivial from one point of view, but utterly important when the church becomes the teddy bear substitute of childhood familiarities. I suspect we have all experiences both these extremes at some point in our lives, and all stations between.

So we need courage, faith and hope. We need to rest in our Lord's promises. The second lesson gives us some guidelines – which are simply another way of saying love God and love your neighbour as yourself.

Spirit of unity – doesn't just come, we have to work at it. We have to search our consciences.

There is no need to panic or to be afraid that we cannot work these problems out, Paul says. God can drastically change the situation. He is that kind of a God. The apostle suggests two things we can do when we get involved in a disagreement like this:

First, there ought to be prayer, prayer for unity. Paul prays himself that God may grant "a spirit of unity among yourselves."

Second, be thankful for what unites us, and minimize the things that divide us.

Remember that if we think that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

We need light that illuminates the issues for us.

We need light that illuminates our own attitudes so that we come to see all the dark corners of our soul

That's what Advent is about: light

We look from afar and see the light approaching

We have our lamps ready (scripture tells us that there is no sympathy for us if our lamps are not ready – there is no sympathy for the unready)

When the Lord comes, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians, he will bring to light things that are hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

Light that sheds on dark corners

We must be ready (Wachet auf)

Give us the grace to listen to each other and try to understand each other.

Be ready to move out of our trenches

Keep our eyes open so that we can see light

We need as the advent collect says the armour of light, and as I say the illuminating beam of light

Let there be light

When the light of Christ shines into my souls and illuminates what is there, I see some unpleasant creatures wriggling about. It may be that you are altogether better people than I, with pure whiteness only within your souls, but looking around I doubt that. So the challenge is to confront my demons inside in the hope that the light shone by the Lantern of Christ will bleach them. Demons

that are enemies of our good selves

only so fighting are we adult fruitful happy (von Hügel)

These enemies within are more dangerous than any external enemy because they inhibit my goodness within, often through guilt. I must love these enemies, love my demons, shine Christ's lantern on them and watch them shrivel up.

This lantern allows all the crusts that have built up round us to melt away. crusts like Russian dolls, and when we get to the core, we get down to our self-less selves.

Then we can stop concentrating on ourselves and start concentrating on God. Like Beuno the dog.

So in Advent let us aim the beam of Christ's life into our hearts so that it can bleach our hurts to give us that sense of detachment that allows us to ignore ourselves and work for the coming of God's kingdom.

OT message

1. Truth can divide
2. Truth can hurt before it heals.
3. Truth produce hatred
4. Truth can leave a person standing alone
5. Truth can appear to fail before it succeeds

NT message

We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. (Romans 15:1-2 NIV)

There are two thumbnail rules to follow when you have to make a quick decision as to whether you ought to insist on liberty in a certain area, or give way to someone else's qualms, or prejudices, or differences of viewpoint.

The first rule is: Choose to please your neighbor rather than yourself. Do not insist on your way of doing things; be quick to give in. After all, this is what love does. Love does not insist on its own rights, Paul tells us in First Corinthians 13. Therefore, if you are loving in your approach, love will adjust and adapt to others. I like J. B. Phillips' translation of this verse.

We who have strong faith ought to shoulder the burden of the doubts and qualms of others, and not just to go our own sweet way. (Romans 15:1 J. B. Phillips)

The second rule, however, says to be careful that your giving in does not allow your neighbor to be confirmed in his weakness, that you do not leave him without encouragement to grow, or to re-think his position. I think this is very important, and it reflects some of the things that Paul has said earlier in this account. We are to seek to build one another up. As I have pointed out before, in all these kinds of questions, if we do nothing but give way to people, and give in to their weaknesses, the church eventually ends up living at the level of the weakest conscience in its midst. This presents a twisted and distorted view of Christian liberty, and the world gets false ideas about what is important, and what Christianity is concerned about. So this helps to balance the situation. Please your neighbor, but for his own good, always leaving something there to challenge his thinking, or make him reach out a bit, and possibly change his viewpoint.

For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me." For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scripture, we might have hope. (Romans 15:3-4 NIV)

Paul's first example for us is Jesus himself. He ran into this kind of problem though he was perfect, though he never did anything that was wrong or out of line. Even though he never on any occasion conducted himself in a way that was in the slightest degree displeasing to God the Father, nevertheless, he ran into these kinds of antagonisms. As Paul says, Jesus fulfilled the Scriptures that predicted that those who did not like God's methods would take it out on him. "The insults of those who insult you," he says, "have fallen on me," (Psalms 69:9 NIV). And so our Lord had to bear with all the unhappiness and sometimes the insults of those who could not be pleased even with what God himself was doing.

Remember in Luke, Chapter 14, the Pharisees felt that Jesus was not keeping the Sabbath properly? They were very upset because he did things they felt were wrong to do on the Sabbath. Now what did our Lord do? Did he give in to their desire? No, he did not. He ignored their protest and went ahead and did things that upset them even more, because if he had gone along with their desires, they would never have learned what God intended the Sabbath to be. So the Lord did not adjust to their antagonism. But on another occasion the Lord was accused of not paying his taxes. When the disciples told him about this, he sent Peter down to the lake to catch a fish, and in the fish's mouth he would find a coin sufficient to pay the tax for both Peter and himself. Jesus said he did this in order not to offend them. That is, he adjusted to their complaint at that point.

If we think we have difficulty in applying these rules we must remember that the Lord himself had difficulty in this, and there is still a third occasion when he publicly acknowledged that there was no way to please everybody. Jesus said, "When John the Baptist came to you, he came neither eating nor drinking." That does not mean that John did not eat food; it means that he carefully observed certain dietary restrictions. He was probably a Nazirite and had taken a vow never to touch any kind

of alcoholic beverage. So Jesus said, "When John came neither eating nor drinking, you said of him, 'He has a demon.' But when I came both eating and drinking, you called me a glutton and a drunkard. So how can I please you?" (Matthew 11:18-19, Luke 7:33-34). Jesus simply recognized the impossibility, at times, of adjusting to everybody. Thus he went ahead and did what God had sent him to do and he let God take care of the difficulties.

I think this is what Paul has in mind here. He tells us that our Lord is the example, and there will be times when you cannot please anybody. There will be other times when you can, and, if you can, you should. But there will be still other times when if you did, you would hinder people in their spiritual growth, and then you should not seek to please them. Not only do we have our Lord's life as our example, but the Old Testament also helps us here, especially in the matter of yielding up our rights. Remember when Abraham and Lot, his nephew, stood looking over the valley of the Jordan River? It was evident that they would have to divide the land among them, and Abraham, who was the older of the two, and the one who, by rights, ought to have had the first choice, gave that choice to Lot. Lot chose first, and he chose the lush, beautiful, green areas of the Jordan valley, leaving Abraham the barren hills. Now Abraham is an example of graciousness; he gave up his rights. Remember when Moses, according to the record, gave up his place as a prince in the household of Pharaoh? As Hebrews tells us, he gave it up in order that he might "suffer reproach with the people of God for a season," (Hebrews 11:25-26). This is a beautiful example. Remember David and Jonathan who were such close friends? We see Jonathan so gracefully yielding his right to the throne to David, his friend, because he knew God had chosen him. And Jonathan also supported him against the wrath of his own father. What a beautiful picture this is. Jonathan is willing to give up in order that David might gain.

When you come to the New Testament there is that scene when John the Baptist says of Jesus, "He must increase; I must decrease," (John 3:30). And yet none of these men who gave up ever lost anything. Now that is the point the apostle is making. These men gained by this. God was glorified, and they themselves ultimately gained, because, in giving up, they achieved the objective that God was after. So Paul gives us this picture of willingness to give up, refusing to do so only when it is going to be hurtful to somebody, leaving them ignorant of the principles of Scripture, bound to some narrow, rigid point of view. So we get help from the past. Not only that, Paul goes on to show us there is encouragement right in the present. Verses 5-6:

May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 15:5-6 NIV)

There is no need to panic or to be afraid that we cannot work these problems out, Paul says. God can drastically change the situation. He is that kind of a God. The apostle suggests two things we can do when we get involved in a disagreement like this:

First, there ought to be prayer, prayer for unity. Paul prays himself that God may grant "a spirit of unity among yourselves." In Luke 11:13 (NIV), Jesus said, "If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those that ask him!" Now Jesus does not mean that is the way to get the Spirit of God to come into your life. He is talking there about problems and difficulties in your life when you need a special ministry of the Holy Spirit. He says, "If you know how to give good gifts to your children, even though basically you have evil in your nature, how much more willing is the heavenly Father to give the Holy Spirit to you in times of problems and difficulties, to preserve the spirit of unity that you desperately need."

This very week I learned of a situation of two brothers in Christ who had a serious difference of viewpoint. Not only did it bring them to a deadlock where they were not able to resolve it (for both felt they were right, and neither was able or willing to give in), but it affected a whole program that God was putting together, one that depended upon their working together. It looked as though the whole thing would come to an ignoble end; nothing could be worked out. But when others heard about this, and the two men involved began to pray, asking God to intervene, then, at the final meeting that was scheduled to try and work this out, one of the men said, "There is no need for us to talk about this, because God has already been talking to me. He showed me that I had been stubborn and obstinate about this, and I'm sorry. Let's go on to other things now; let's get the program started." The whole difficulty just faded away because God is able to change situations and bring about unity. So prayer for unity is one of the most important things we can do when there is this kind of disagreement among us.

The second thing the apostle says is to praise God for the relationship you already have, "so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." With one heart and mouth. Remember that you are brothers. Give God thanks together for what unites you, and minimize the things that divide you. Remember the important thing is that in the eyes of the watching world you manifest the unity of brotherhood that God has brought about. You did not

make yourselves brothers and sisters; God did. Therefore he desires that to be visible to the world around. That is why, in Ephesians 4, we are admonished to be "eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," (Ephesians 4:3). One of the present helps we have is to pray, to ask God for the spirit of unity, and then to praise him for the unity that already exists. We have had encouragement from the past, and encouragement from the present, and now Paul tells us to be encouraged by what the future holds (Verses 7-12):

Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs so that the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy, so it is written:

**"For this reason I will praise you among the Gentiles;
I will sing hymns to your name." [Psalm 18:49]**

Again, it says,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people." [Deuteronomy. 32:43]

And again,

**"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and sing praises to him, all you peoples." [Psalm 117:1]**

And again, Isaiah says,

**"The root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
the Gentiles will hope in him." [Isaiah 11:10] (Romans 15:7-12 NIV)**

Now what Paul is saying here is that God is already working out a great program that involves reconciling the Jews and the Gentiles. God has announced that he is going to do that, and he will bring it to pass. It has already started. It started when Christ accepted both Jews and Gentiles, regardless of the great differences between them.

I do not know if you have ever been involved in a church fight over an issue like drinking or smoking or movies or dances or whatever, but if you have, you know that tempers can get very hot. People can get very upset, and factions can form; divisions and feuds break out. And yet I have never heard of a church fight on those grounds that was any worse than the attitudes that Jews and Gentiles had toward one another in Paul's day. The Jews held the Gentiles in contempt; they called them dogs. They would have nothing to do with them. The Jews even regarded it as sinful to go into a Gentile's house and they would never dream of eating with a Gentile. They regarded them with utter contempt. In the book of Acts, Peter got into serious trouble with his Jewish friends because he went into the home of Cornelius the centurion, and ate with him. It was only because Peter was able to show that the Holy Spirit sent him there, and used him there, that he was able to justify his conduct to his friends.

Of course, if the Jews felt that way about the Gentiles, the Gentiles paid it right back in kind. They hated the Jews. They called them all kinds of names; they looked down on them. This is where modern anti-Semitism was born. These were opposing factions who hated one another, and would have nothing to do with one another, Yet, Paul says, that kind of division God is healing by the work of Jesus. And how did Jesus do it? Paul's point is that Jesus began his work by becoming himself a minister of circumcision. The version I have says he "became a servant of the Jews." That is based on the idea that what Paul wrote was, "Christ became a minister of the circumcision," which is another name for the Jews. Actually what the text says is, "he became a minister of circumcision," which does not necessarily refer to the Jews as a people, but refers to their customs and rituals and ceremonies.

What the apostle is arguing is that the Lord healed this breach between the Jews and the Gentiles by his giving in and limiting his own liberty. He who designed the human body, he who made it perfect, exactly as it ought to be, he himself consented to the act of circumcision. His body was mutilated. That part of his body which was the mark of the flesh was to be cut off. Jesus consented to that and limited himself in that way. He became a circumcised Jew. He who declared in his ministry that all foods are clean, and thus gave clear evidence that he understood the liberty that God gives us in the matter of eating, never once ate anything but kosher food. He never had a ham sandwich. He never had bacon and eggs for breakfast. He limited himself to the Jewish diet, even though he declared that all foods were clean.

He who was without sin insisted on a sinner's baptism. He came to John, and John said, "Why are you coming to me? I need to be baptized by you. You do not need to be baptized." Jesus said, "Allow it to be so, for in this way it becomes us. It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness," (Matthew 3:15). So he who had no reason to be baptized consented to be baptized. He who longed to heal the hurts of the world said that when he came, he limited himself to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Now, Paul's argument is that the results of that limitation were that Jesus broke the back of the argument and of the contempt between the Jew and the Gentile. He reached both Jews and Gentiles to the glory of God. If you trace this through you can see that what Paul is saying is that in the death and resurrection of Jesus, God showed his faithfulness to the Jews in fulfilling the promises made to the patriarchs; and he showed his mercy to the Gentiles, saving them who were without any promises at all. Thus the two, Jew and Gentile, shall fully become one, just as the Scriptures predict

May the God of hope fill you with great joy and peace so you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13 NIV)

Prayer:

Our Father, we do thank you for the peace and joy and righteousness that are gifts to us from your Spirit at work in our hearts. Thank you for the liberty and freedom that you give us in these areas. We pray that we who regard ourselves as strong, may be willing to bear the burdens of the weak, and not to offend them or to hurt them or to slash at them. May love be evident among us, Lord, but above all else, we pray that we may manifest a spirit of unity to the watching world that knows no way to get divergent factions together. We thank you for this miracle of unity among us, and ask that it be preserved in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

Need for light

Armour of light

When the Lord comes, he will bring to light things now hidden in darkness, and will disclose the purposes of the heart.

cf 1Corinthians 4:5

Light that sheds on dark corners

We must be ready (wachtet auf)

Listen to each other

Be ready to move out of our trenches

Keep our eyes open so that we can see light

Advent 2, 2008

7 December 2008

Isaiah 40:1-11

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

First word uttered by John Baptist in ministry: 'repent.'

First word uttered by Jesus in ministry: 'repent.'

Some of us were brought up to think this means having to bear something unpleasant, even painful. A punishment. John B a rather fearful figure: camel's hair, leather belt, eating locusts and wild honey. You might think this is to reinforce the message that repentance should be unpleasant and distasteful.

Absolute rubbish. This was not to show us how to 'do penance'. It was to identify himself as a prophet in the Elijah tradition – 'a hairy man, leather belt around his waist' (2 Kings 1:8). Elijah opposed the kings of Israel who did evil in the sight of the Lord, just as John Baptist opposed Herod (Mark 6.18). His food and clothing are, as Jesus recognised, a rebuke for those who wear soft, luxurious clothes and live in palaces (Luke 7:25).

John didn't expect people to imitate his choice of food and clothing. When people asked him what they should do in response to his preaching, his replies were mild: if you've two coats, give one to someone who doesn't have one (you don't need to kill yourself to give them one); don't over-tax, don't rob by violence or false accusation, and be content with your wages (Luke 3:10-14).

John's repentance doesn't mean doing unpleasant things to make up for past sins. In fact, it's not concerned at all with the past, but rather with the future.

Penance, repentance, simply means turn, change. Penance means resolving to change the way we see ourselves. From that change, all else will follow. If we say we're unwilling to change, then, we're not Christian.

If we think of ourselves as people who *should be* wearing luxurious clothes and living in palaces then we'll be anxious about it all, and we'll busy ourselves with relieving these anxieties. Idolising self. But if we think of ourselves as seeking the kingdom of God that is within us, then we know that life is more than food, and the body more than clothing; and that the Lord who feeds the beasts

This giving up of anxiety about tomorrow is the beginning of repentance. It's a good message for people of my generation, when our pensions are likely to be worth nothing. Why worry? What can I do in the face of the corporate corruption and institutional iniquity that surrounds us. And not worrying about what I did in the past, and what might happen in the future, means I can be more attentive to living in the here and now. And this, boys and girls, is Jesus' message. *My kingdom is not of this world*—or the next—but an inner kingdom in which this world and its toys are illusion: here today and gone tomorrow.

John's message is that we need to do this for ourselves, personally. *I* need to be watchful and awake. *I* need to take responsibility for myself. Yes, community action is important in Christianity, but surely it has to spread from personal responsibility. It's *my* responsibility to participate in the life of church and community *as well as I can*. It's *my* responsibility to look after myself *as well as I can*. It's a refusal to take responsibility for one's actions that is at the root of all the evil in the world. In Dewsbury. In Haringey. In Zimbabwe. The notion that all that matters is my instant gratification, never mind the consequences for other people. And however much we may be horrified at the behaviour of those in the news at the moment, it hurts to acknowledge that their behaviour is but an extreme version of breaking the speed limit, for example. It all comes down to supposing that my wishes are more important than anyone else's. Sure, my wishes are as important as anyone else's: love your neighbour as, not better than, yourself. But the neighbour's wants are as important as ours. Maybe I need to remember that when I'm sitting at Loundsley Green traffic lights and cursing some old trout in the car in front who seems to be waiting for a particular shade of green.

This is the sin of the world. This is the sin of the world that living according to Our Lord's command can take away if we ditch self. *And if you want to know the way, be pleased to hear what he did say.*

Which takes me back to John Baptist and the prophets, and I've gone on long enough.

Let me finish by asking you a question. Elijah opposed the corruption of the Kings of Israel. John Baptist opposed the corruption of Herod. Who are today's prophets? Dennis Skinner?

Amen

Advent 4, 2008

There's a rather good book called 'What is the point of being a Christian'. It was written by Timothy Radcliffe, a monk sometimes on the radio and TV. He's recently written another one that says amongst other things that coming to church shouldn't be about being made to feel cosy and comfortable, and reminding us of childhood securities, but should be about being challenged to move on in our spiritual journey. We should leave church feeling uncomfortable, provoked.

This chimes in with what I said a few weeks ago about how we move the church away from being a haven for cuddly toy services and 'Jesus is my friend so nothing bad will happen'. It's a particular problem at this time of year when people come to church and—I kid you not—complain if Santa doesn't put in an appearance. Santa, that well known figure present at the crib according to the Gospel of St Melanie. This is one of the reasons why many clergy feel uncomfortable with Christmas. Uncomfortable is a word I'd associate with Mary today. She was clearly very uncomfortable at the news from Gabriel, despite him (yes, angels are hims) trying to butter her up a bit first.

What this story is about is the Divine Lord making a home for himself. Let's look at the history of this. In Holy Scripture, humans have from time to time tried to make a home for the Divine Lord. When David and others tried to build a house for the Ark of the Covenant, that is what they were doing, for the Ark was where YHWH 'resided' [Hooray for Indiana Jones films]. Then there's the

Lord's house in the Temple, in that part beyond the veil. When the Jews talk about 'beyond the veil', they're talking about the place where YHWH resides, and where only the high priest may go, and go only once a year.

Do you see that when we humans try to build a home for the Lord, we limit the lord, we try to keep him in a box (for example), or a particular part of a particular room. Do you see that the rending of the veil of the Temple that happens at the crucifixion/resurrection is the explosion of Christ into the world? And at the Ascension, an explosion into the cosmos.

This is the real meaning of the Christmas story—not humanity building a house for the Divine Lord, but the Divine Lord making his home in humanity—in Mary's uterus, and then at the nativity bursting out into the world.

Now let me tell you what goes on in a woman's uterus.

- the embryo burrows into the uterine lining;
- maternal blood bathes cells of the embryo;
- nutrients pass from mother to embryo, and waste products from embryo to mother;
- cells of the embryo penetrate deep into maternal tissues; some of them replace cells that line maternal arteries, and some are carried elsewhere within the mother;
- the embryo manufactures hormones, some of which pass into the mother's blood stream.

So, in Mary's uterus,

- divine cells penetrate deep into, and are surrounded by, Mary's tissue;
- divine cells spread throughout Mary during her pregnancy;
- Mary and the embryonic Christ sustain each other and exchange substances;
- divine cells are left behind in Mary after she has been delivered of her Son. She has been changed, as are all women changed by every pregnancy.

This combination of biology and theology is, I think, original to me. Some theologians are encouraging me to publish it – including Rowan Williams. I tell you this not to show off, but to show that these are not just the incoherent ramblings of an ordained idiot, but that they have if not divine approval, the next best thing that the CoE can offer.

Mary is indeed special: she has cells and fluids of the Christ-embryo invading her and so she is, as Holy Scripture says, indeed Blessed. But hold on a minute Mary, blessed as she is, is one of us. A human being. And we, like Mary, can let the Divine Lord grow within us as she did in her. And the word *grow* is important. The Divine Lord in Mary grew too big for her uterus. The Divine Lord came out of Mary's nether regions to walk in the world. There is no anatomical organ, or Ark, or part of a temple that can contain the Divine Lord. The last thing we should do is try and limit it in any way whatsoever. The Divine Lord can grow within us, if we let it. The question is: how do we let it burst out of us to spread throughout the world.

Now put this in the context of church growth. In the post this week came an invitation to a diocesan afternoon on Saturday 7 February where we consider how we can get our churches to grow up and grow out. This matters: look around you. How many of us will be here in 10 years time, in 20 years time? You see why it matters.

It would be good to have some of you interested in coming with me. Church is not just about spending all our money on maintaining the building, or just about trying to maintain an image of church that we approve of because it's what we grew up with. It's certainly not about making us feel comfortable. It's about how we burst through these walls and make an impact on the local community and the world in which we live.

We might well be frightened as we realise the extent of this challenge. Mary was frightened when she was invited to be the enabler of growth. She didn't know how painful it was going to be to watch what they did to him whom she had nurtured. As an example of saying 'yes' to the Divine Lord, she is unique and outstanding and to be honoured above all other humans. And so we have a duty with the Angel to say Hail Mary, full of grace, ...

18 January 2009

Epiphany 2, Christian Unity

1 Samuel 3 1-10
Revelation 5 1-10
John 1 43-end

Look at that first reading: the call of Samuel. That made a great impression on me at Sunday school about 50 years ago, and the hymn that goes with it: Hushed was the evening hymn, the temple courts were dark. The idea that the Lord calls us by name.

The experience of the gospel.

It makes us ask what experience of the Lord do we have? A personal communication? An urge? A faint stirring that perhaps we ought to do this or that? Not everyone has a direct call like Samuel—though some do. People are sceptical these days about such supernatural events, but I know that there are people here who have been blessed with such phenomena.

But it's not just these direct calls that matter. It's tempting to say that people who have these direct calls are somehow more favoured than those of us that don't. But this ain't so. We don't all have the same experience of the Divine. We don't all have the same personality types. We are made differently. Faint stirrings can be very productive – might oaks ...

We are all called.

It must have been easier for the disciples: at least they were face to face with Jesus. He must have been a charismatic leader to make people follow him so readily. And yes, he was a leader. Yes, a leader. Not a chairman, not a democrat, not a committee man, but a charismatic leader: put yourself aside and come and follow me.

There is in humanity a longing for something better (Barry Gibbs funeral last week): there is a hunger, witness interest in paranormal.

We see that there's no lasting comfort to be had from storing up possessions; hoarding money is rather pointless, or club memberships. There is a yearning for something 'other'. Maybe now is the time for you to act on that stirring within.

Nobody is too old. Everybody can do something.

Candles, Serving, Offertory, Chalice assistant, Reader, leading the prayers. House groups. Reaching to the community, Book group, Anything. I can't do everything, and neither do I want to control everything. I want to enable lots of things, and control only the things that I am duty bound to control.

This is a message that I urge every one of you here today to consider. I would like to encourage everybody to think what they can do to enrich the life of the church and the community. Maybe something stirs inside you that you'd like to do this or that.

There's a danger in every church community that everything is left in the hands of a few people, and it's easy for those people to get swamped with what they have to do.

So don't be shy. Be bold! If you feel unworthy: Abraham, Moses, David, Jonah, Elizabeth, Mary

G K Chesterton: *"I caught the thief with an unseen hook and an invisible line which is long enough to let him wander to the ends of the world, and still to bring him back with a twitch upon the thread."*

Chesterton's image is a metaphor for God's patient way with us. We are hooked, and he lets us "wander to the ends of the world," but will bring us "back with a twitch upon the thread." Maybe this gentle urge, this longing is such a twitch upon the thread.

That's the story of Jonah, too. He sought to flee to the ends of the world, but God brought him back.

And hear the Blessed George Herbert

George Herbert 1593-1633

The Collar

I struck the board, and cry'd, No more,
I will abroad.
What? shall I ever sigh and pine?
My lines and life are free; free as the roe,
Loose as the winde, as large as store.
Shall I be still in suit?
Have I no harvest but a thorn
To let me bloud, and not restore
What I have lost with cordiall fruit?
Sure there was wine
Before my sighs did drie it; there was corn
Before my tears did drown it.
Is the yeare onely lost to me?
Have I no bayes to crown it?
No flowers, no garlands gay? all blasted?
All wasted?
Not so, my heart; but there is fruit,
And thou hast hands.
Recover all thy sigh-blown age
On double pleasures; leave thy cold dispute
Of what is fit and not; forsake thy cage,
Thy rope of sands,
Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee
Good cable, to enforce and draw,
And be thy law,
While thou didst wink and wouldst not see.
Away; take heed:
I will abroad.
Call in thy deaths head there: tie up thy fears.
He that forbears
To suit and serve his need,
Deserves his load.
But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
At every word,
Me thoughts I heard one calling, *Child:*
And I reply'd, *My Lord.*