

# The Word Became Flesh—Yes, *Flesh*

Sermon for the Third Mass of Christmas Day, 2011

All Saints' Anglican Church, Ainslie, ACT, Australia

Isaiah 52: 7-10; Psalm 98: 1-4; Hebrews 1: 1-4; John 1: 1-14

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+In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

*And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory ... (Jn 1: 14).*

In this third, and last, of the Church's three masses for Christmas day, our readings from the Bible focus on the meaning of Christ's coming. The beautiful words of Isaiah's prophecy announce to God's ancient people—to that long-suffering nation of asylum seekers and dreamers—that the God who always loved them and protected them was coming to rebuild ruined Jerusalem, to renew the people of God, to stick up for them once again before all their self-proclaimed betters among the nations. And all this was to happen in plain sight, as Isaiah declares: in plain socio-political history. Our psalm this morning, sung by my lovely wife, is itself lovely: God's people then and now—in Israel and in the Church—can rejoice, because a marvellous thing is coming from God. The letter to the Hebrews in our second reading explains how Jesus fulfils these promises in person, as “the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being”. John's Gospel puts this insight in different language, talking today about God's Word becoming flesh. Friends, this is wonderful news. But it's strange news, too. It's not what people expect—not then; not now. This is why John's Gospel also tells us today that Jesus came to his own people and they didn't receive him—and of course they still don't want to know him, in large numbers, do they, up and down our Western world? Or if they do want to know him, it's on their own terms, not his.

The problem we have is that this message of God coming to us in the flesh—in the midst of life as we know it, that is—is confronting for us on two levels. It doesn't fit

with how we prefer to understand God, and it doesn't fit with how we prefer to see ourselves.

Regarding our preferred understanding of God, we find this Christian message too specific, and perhaps too demanding. God's fine these days as some sort of metaphysical speculation. But, instead of some private opinion or spirituality of the heart, on Christmas day we're handed a squirming baby by God—and he's a baby who wants to take over our life, as babies do. Then of course this baby Jesus starts growing up, and asking awkward questions, and upsetting the way things normally go. In fact, he's such a pain that eventually he has to be judicially murdered to shut him up. But then his resurrection is revealed as God's great game changer, uprooting once and for all the fear and paralysis that makes for lives of docile predictability.

Rather than today's widespread preference for non-committal spirituality, then, which gives us some comfort and which we can more or less control, this squirming Christmas baby brings with him a whole extended family of fellow Christians who want us to be part of their lives. And of course babies come with a lot of paraphernalia, as every young parent knows—in Jesus' case it's scripture and sacraments, it's Church and creed. Better to leave this squirming baby behind when we leave church today, don't you think—this Word become noisy and demanding flesh, with all his weird followers and all their strange expectations? Better to keep God safe in the realm of the spiritual, in the realm of take it or leave it, don't you think?

The other difficulty we have with the Word become flesh has to do with our own attitude to the flesh: that is, to actual human life. Being a creature of flesh means being limited in our options; it means belonging to our own time and, to some extent still, to our own place. It means having to work out our human life within a whole world of boundaries. We're creatures shaped by a particular language, ethnicity and gender; we're people with a particular life story that we can't entirely choose; we're physical bodies with particular needs, possibilities and limitations; we're creatures who belong to this particular family, to this particular spouse, to this particular set of commitments, to this particular occupation, to this particular home, and so it goes. All this is seen nowadays as an unbearable state of affairs by many people, in what the

advertisers want us to believe is a new age of infinite choices. We hate to be tied down, to be subject to the predictable, to be denied the specialness and distinctiveness that we just *know* to be ours. Constraint and limitation, authority and custom, tradition and belonging, can barely be tolerated because, if we're settled and stable, we won't be the restless consumers that a growth economy needs us to be.

These days, with texting, tweeting and social networking recasting what relationships look like, the flesh becomes a liability, the face-to-face becomes an unnecessary and unwelcome extra, the long-term commitment becomes increasingly unthinkable and unendurable—or, at the very least, it becomes optional. Apparently we're more comfortable as nodes in an electronic network than as creatures of flesh, embedded in particular communities and relationships. To an extent we even punish our flesh. Unfit, overweight people like me take risks with our health, because in one way or another we resist the wisdom of our bodies, of our definite physical nature, which calls on us to be more active and to eat simply and well. Yet the lean, sexy and networked also punish their flesh, with savage exercise regimes, piercing, tattooing, utilitarian sexuality, drug use, and smoking to help stay thin.

But life in the flesh is also life in the physical environment where all living creatures belong, and here we're just as uncomfortable with the limitations placed upon us. Increasingly, as a civilization, we're resisting the increasingly urgent call to live sustainably in our physical world. We refuse the evidence of just how serious climate change is, because, if we accepted it, we'd have to adapt to the actual conditions of our physical world, of our flesh—we'd have to become people of serious sober restraint in how we inhabit our world. And who wants that?

One more thing: we also resent the increasing complexity of life in our world, with many people running away from it in the grip of anxiety. Yet in our post-modern era we have to face the fact that pluralism is here to stay; coping positively with the diversity of people and lifestyles is what life in the real world is going to require from now on, and that's just that—though not for an increasing number of anxious and embittered individuals and movements today. The God whose Word became flesh doesn't deplore this state of affairs but, plainly, many people do. They prefer fantasy worlds of nostalgic purity, uncomplicated authority, and over-simple choices. Yet the simple truth for us creatures of flesh is that there's only one world where we can

make a go of it, and that's *this* world—with all its complexities, frustrations, and in-your-face diversity.

So what does it mean for us today that the Word became flesh and lived among us, and that we have seen his glory? It means that this squirming baby Jesus of Christmas brings God to us with a shocking new realism, also confirming us in a shocking new earthiness and groundedness as human beings. God comes to transform our lives in the real world. It means that rather than escapists to heaven, we're called to share God's investment in healing the earth. It means that rather than fantasists with our heads in the clouds, we're called to be committed people with our feet on the ground. It means that God calls us to dwell with peace and confidence in the midst of all this constraint and complexity: not punishing our bodies, not resenting our particular commitments, not fearing the plurality of life. It means not avoiding the Church, either, but accepting it as inevitable and appropriate; it means not preferring our own version of spirituality, but welcoming God's preference for sacramental earthiness.

Friends, today we get handed the squirming baby Jesus, and don't count on that old furphy about 'no crying he makes'. Jesus the Word of God comes in person to reveal God's glory in the flesh of this, the real world—the world God loves, and won't give up on.

The Lord be with you...