

Christmas Day, 2020, Luke 2:1-20

Human-ness Breaking Out!

The Christmas Story is above all about God in history. At Christmas, Christians celebrate a God of love who shows himself to us as one who is *for us*; as one who is *for us* through being *with us*; as one who is *with us* through *being human at its most vulnerable, a child*; as one who is not just a *vulnerable child in the biological sense*, but as one who is *vulnerable in the social and political sense*: after all there is no room, no space, no place for this child, apart from a stable reserved for animals.

But there is another side to the story as well; one we seldom talk about, but one that stands front and centre: This other side speaks about humans, *about us*, about *who we may become*: that we are more than just the sum-total of our genes, of our biology: that we are *potentially divine*. The Christmas Story is a two-way street: *God becomes human and we humans become God-like*.

Let me ground that a little bit!

In an earlier life I was involved in academic work in Boston, Massachusetts; in something called moral theology: today's word we use is ethics. In 2001, the towers in New York city collapsed as a result of aircraft being driven into them: that date, September 11th, became known the world over as 9/11. I was on my way to the university in Cambridge, on the other side of the river that divides the city, when I was advised of the disaster. Looking at the imagery of the impact, my first thought was that it was a movie – but it wasn't.

What followed, what flowed on from that event, can hardly be described. For the first month, numbness, as people struggled to get their head around it all. Into the second month however, anger grew, particularly against those Americans of Arab descent, in fact anyone who looked as if they were from Central Asia. Men and women, of Middle Eastern appearance were increasingly fearful of leaving their homes for fear of not returning, while many also blockaded their houses, both day and night. Gradually assaults increased, with knives and hand-guns. One woman, an Iraqi, who I had come to know as the parking attendant at the local railway station, was shot at, the cubicle shattering around her, as she suffered injuries from flying slivers of glass.

In this context, some Christians asked themselves what does it mean to be human; what does it mean to become God-like. Within weeks, was born an organization of Christian inspiration including not just Christians, but more broadly, people of good will, who accompanied these people at risk: as they walked in the street, as they did their shopping, as they went to and returned from work, as they slept at night. In a situation of danger, where patriotism came to be reduced to and confused with hatred of outsiders, these actions dignified everyone and challenged the voices of violence and xenophobia.

As that work evolved, Christmas drew close, and I was drawn back into the biblical Christmas stories. You know, there are two: one in the Gospel of Matthew and the

other in the Gospel of Luke. The story from Matthew is dark, forbidding, ominous; It includes the Magi, the conspiratorial Herod, and the disturbing persecution of Jesus and his family, who become asylum seekers, refugees. The story from Luke, the story we always read on Christmas morning, the try we have this morning, is altogether happier. It includes the shepherds, those rustic ruffians, who never-the-less, hear and embrace God's initiative, where Jesus offers himself as human: an expression, *the* expression of how the world and we might be. As I lived those weeks with others, Christmas 2001, as we read Luke's story of the Birth of Jesus, we decided that we had to try become human, try to *make make humanness break out*.

My invitation today is this: that you spend time with family yes! But that you spend time alone! That you reflect upon the extraordinary power of the Christmas event! That you see it as both about what God does for *us* in his solidarity with us, but also what it says about who and what we as human beings *may become*. In a time of uncertainty, anxiety and fear, may the incarnation of God among us give us pause for thought and cause for celebration!