23 December 2018: Said Matins with Hymns
The Fourth Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 32:1–8, Revelation 22:6–end
Canon Professor Carol Harrison, Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity

‘Knitivity’

The time of waiting for a child to be born is often accompanied by a flurry of knitting. Grandmothers, aunts, sisters, cousins, the expectant mother – perhaps even grandfathers and uncles – get out their knitting needles and produce hats, matinee coats (odd name!), bootees – all in white, for either a girl or a boy.

I also got out my knitting needles this advent. In a moment of inspiration in the Cathedral shop I bought a book entitled ‘Knitivity’ which gives all the instructions needed to knit a whole nativity scene – Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus in white drawers and swaddling clothes, three shepherds (one small; two grown up), three resplendent kings carrying knitted gold, frankincense and myrrh, an angel, a very large donkey, an unlikely looking ass and numerous fluffy sheep (which require special wool); there is even a knitted star. My knitting skills aren’t great, so at the moment I have Joseph’s and Mary’s body and clothes and a very naked baby Jesus. The rest will probably take until next year. The real challenge has been our Lady’s hair, which isn’t knitted but crocheted – long, golden strands of chainwork, which I’ve never done before. There are diagrams and written instructions but what I really need is someone to sit down with me and actually show me how to do it.

There is a lot about Christmas that is precisely this: being shown how to do something in very human terms. Rather than simply telling his people who He is, how they should live, what they should and should not do, and exhorting them to listen, wait and prepare for His coming through the words and instructions of His prophets – the prophecies that have been ringing in our ears throughout Advent as (like this morning) we have read Isaiah and sung the Messiah – God has now decided it is time to actually show us exactly what he means Himself. The words are no longer necessary – the law and the prophets are fulfilled – the Shepherd, the Wonderful one, the Counsellor, the Mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace – will finally be born as a human child. The Cathedral choir positively skipped with joy as they sang ‘For unto us a Child is Born’ in our Advent services. ‘For unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given’.
We have waited in advent, as expectantly as any expectant mother or family, eagerly anticipating the birth of our Saviour. We have done what we can in preparation – the candles are lit, the Cathedral is decorated, the manger is ready. The time of waiting and watching will soon be over; the child who has been in the dark womb for nine months will emerge into the light; there will be singing and presents. At first the singing of the angels – Glory to God on High and on earth, peace and goodwill towards men; in due course, the presents of the kings – gold, frankincense and myrrh. We will join the singing and the present giving, to celebrate the arrival of the new baby.

But why does God need to come as a baby? Why does he need to be conceived by an unmarried mother, born in a foreign land, in a makeshift shelter; be brought up by a carpenter; seek out the company of fishermen; never hold down a proper job; get himself arrested, tried and put to death? Why such an inglorious birth? such an obscure family? such an oddball life? such a shameful death?

Well, the short answer is that these are all very human – we might say all too human – and that is really the point. It is no good telling someone something; we also need to be shown how to do it. When I arrived in the Cathedral as a lay Canon everyone assumed I knew exactly what I was doing. I was the only one who knew that I didn’t – and then the Precentor quickly guessed that I had absolutely no idea and offered to do what he called his ‘walk and talk’ – basically he walked me through the liturgy, explaining where to go, when to bow, when to turn, when to kneel, how to carry the gospel, how to hold my hands – even how to maintain what he called ‘poise’. And so he walked with me, explaining and – more importantly – demonstrating everything as we went. And so I had the complicated choreography of the liturgy written into by mind and body – a mental and a physical memory. I suppose another example are those books that try to teach ballroom dancing by describing the steps with diagrams of where to put your feet. It is just so much more effective to put on the music and actually have someone show you the steps, hold your hand, guide you, nudge you in the right direction, until you can take your own faltering steps, and gradually pick up the movements; until it is all so familiar you don’t have to think about it but can move with grace and ease across the dance floor.

This is because to be human is to have a body as well as a mind and heart; to be human is to grow, to learn, to relate to others through seeing, hearing, touching, smelling and tasting, as much as thinking and reasoning; to be human is to acknowledge our dependence on others and our need for others; to be human is to learn from our mistakes, our errors, our wrong moves – from dropping stitches, treading on toes, bowing at the wrong time; to be human is to move from infancy to childhood to youth to middle age to old age.
How should we do these things aright? So that we do not forget our Creator? So that we are always turned in heart, mind and soul towards Him? So that we learn from Him, follow His example, imitate Him, have his ways written into our minds and bodies? So that our lives, in every age - whether as baby, child, teenager or adult, are fashioned by Him; so that we learn humility, forgiveness, acceptance of suffering, self-sacrifice, bravery, love. The answer is: because God Himself was born as a human being.

Being human is a challenging business. It is difficult to get it right or even – often – to know what to do. We need others to show us: to crochet with us, to walk with us, to dance with us – and this is precisely what God has done in Jesus. He has written his ways into our minds and bodies – not just by showing us, but by relating to us as one human being to another.

Responding to the question as to why it would not have been so much more straightforward for God to have inspired us directly to know and do his will, without the need for – or without bothering with – human mediators or teachers, Augustine emphasises the way in which the process of teaching is one that not only informs other people but actually unites us with each other. It is a process in which we receive as much as we give, and can only take place between one human being and another human being:

‘there would be no way for love, which ties people together in the bonds of unity, to make souls overflow and as it were intermingle with each other, if human beings learned nothing from other humans’. He appeals to the common human experience of sharing something we know well with someone who is unfamiliar with it, so that we appreciate it through their eyes; we see it anew, and in the process are brought into a closer bond with them. This is how communicating the faith works: ‘For so great is the power of sympathy’ he comments, ‘that when people are affected by us as we speak and we by them as they learn, we dwell in one another and thus both they, as it were, speak in us what they hear, while we, after a fashion, learn in them what we teach.’

Now, if this is possible for human beings, then what is possible for God become a human being for our sakes? For he who is coming is not only our beginning and our way but also our end: he is Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end. In him we are not only born, and have our being, but also our everlasting life.

‘Surely I am coming soon’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

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