‘What is the chief end of man? Man’s chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever.’ So opens the Westminster Catechism of 1647. The Westminster Catechism was produced by a group of distinguished Calvinist theologians, assigned the task of drafting a brief statement of the Reformed faith in the closing years of the Civil War. Now a committee of Calvinists perhaps doesn’t strike one as an altogether promising starting point, but despite its origins in a period of British history every bit as conflicted as our own, as an affirmation of how Christians are called to see the purpose of human existence this first clause of the Westminster Catechism is hard to beat: ‘What is the chief end of humanity? Our chief end is to glorify and enjoy God for ever.’ That is the high target to which our lives are pointed, and the worship Christians offer whenever we gather together seeks to bring us a little nearer to it. That we may understand a little better – and misunderstand a little less – what it is to glorify and enjoy God; God who in turn enjoys our company and desires to glorify us.

Of course more often than not we fail to reach that target, we fall short of the mark. Sometimes worship can seem not transparent but opaque, sometimes we feel alienated from God whose company we are called to share. But almost always this is our own fault. Of the besetting vices of the clergy, for example, is a critical approach to worship. It is all too easy for ‘religious professionals’ (as sociologists call us), to spot the mote in others’ prayers whilst missing the beam in our own efforts. As a curate, I well remember being unaccountably irritated by a prayer: it began with the harmless phrase ‘Intimate God, come close to us...’. Insufferable… touchy-feely… lovey-dovey cosiness, I found myself beginning to think. But then, mercifully, my own hypocrisy suddenly came home to me. I recalled the prayer that Augustine of Hippo offers at the heart of his Confessions: ‘O my God, you are more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest that is within me’ or in the Latin ‘interior intimo meo et superior summo meo.’ What is that but an address to the God who is at once most intimate and most ineffable?
I tell this tale not simply as a warning against clerical Pharisaism, but, more importantly, as a reminder of a truth that each of today’s readings brings home to us: the truth that God is close to us, closer than we’re usually prepared to imagine; and that God wishes us to recognise, acknowledge and enjoy that proximity to the full.

Our first reading from Isaiah began by recounting ‘the gracious deeds, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord’ – how God has acted on behalf of his people in history. But the kernel of this section of Isaiah is not the elaboration of God’s acts, it’s simply the enjoyment of God’s presence, a presence made known ‘in the abundance of his steadfast love’. And the reading concludes with a wonderful image of this steadfast love in practice, an image of God the loving Father carrying his child Israel high on his shoulders: ‘he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.’ As Jane Williams says, it is as though we as God’s children can sense again ‘the magical mixture of excitement and security that riding up so high on a father’s shoulders can bring.’

Our second reading from the letter to the Hebrews makes the same point, even if it is masked in a less poetic, more technical vocabulary. Hebrews is saturated with the imagery of priesthood, seeing Christ as the great High Priest whose sacrifice has redeemed the sins of the world and forever brought to an end the ritual sacrifices of the Old Testament priesthood. The technical term for this final sacrifice of Christ is atonement. As the letter puts it: ‘Therefore Jesus had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.’ This language of atoning sacrifice can be hard to connect with, but it becomes a lot clearer if we focus on the key words mercy and faith: Jesus comes as ‘a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God.’ This is where the heart of the atoning life and work of Christ lies: Christ is the merciful and faithful mediator who restores our closeness, our intimacy with God. In Christ we become a priesthood of believers; that is to say, our humanity is made intimate with God, by the intimacy of God’s divinity in Christ.

And that intimacy becomes fully apparent in our gospel reading. First we see the trusting intimacy of the holy family, forced to flee alone and by night, to seek safety in the land of Egypt. There is intimacy between Joseph and the angel whose message he unquestioningly accepts. But there is also intimacy between Joseph and Mary and their new-born baby. The angel’s repeated formula, ‘Get up, take the child, and his mother Mary…’ helps us to see the family almost as one person, bound together in love and responsibility by and for the child Jesus. And then there is, again, a third intimacy: the
intimacy of God with humankind, God who has entrusted his future to a vulnerable peasant couple, to a pair of asylum-seekers in a strange land.

It is this unshakeable intimate trust against which the great King Herod is powerless. For Herod, power is all about command and control. When he seeks to kill Jesus, he reveals how enslaved he is to an ideology of control. Herod seeks security, not love; control, not freedom. And in doing so he loses all four: security and love and freedom and control all slip from his grasp, even as he tries to clutch them to himself.

Sadly, we’re all too familiar with the impulses of Herod both in our world and in ourselves. It is very hard for us to believe that safety can be found in the risk of vulnerability, to see that our own freedom needn’t – and in fact probably won’t – involve controlling others.

After all, Matthew’s gospel tells us that Herod’s actions are the fulfilment of a prophecy in Jeremiah, so at first sight this makes it seem as if God must have foreseen Herod’s cruelty, must have willed the slaughter of the innocents. It looks as if we can blame God, not ourselves. But it’s helpful to recall that biblical prophecy is not so much about prediction of the future as about insight into human weakness and self-deception. It is our reluctance to see where our true good lies, the opaqueness of our vision of God, that leads to Herod’s worldview, to the sin that is the barrier we try to set up between ourselves and God.

Today’s readings leave me with two images. The first is of the child riding high on the shoulders of his loving Father; the second is of the holy family fleeing frightened and under cover of darkness from the threat of naked violence. Both are images of God’s intimacy with us. An intimacy which loves and uplifts us, but which is also forever vulnerable to the schemes and machinations of human domination.

‘What is the chief end of humanity? Our chief end is to glorify and enjoy God for ever.’ We have been created to glorify and enjoy God’s company, and, in turn, to be glorified and enjoyed by God. Contrary to our delusions, it is in God that our true safety and our true humanity lie. So in the thanksgiving of this Eucharist, let us praise, glorify and enjoy the God who is more inward than our most inward part and higher than the highest that is within us.

In nomine…