

Christmas Day 2016 Isa 9; Luke 2: 1-14

Christmas is about becoming human. Becoming who God intends us to be.

As we crane our necks to see over the heads of the shepherds, we glimpse the gift of our humanity, the gift of who we are and who we will be.

A couple of weeks ago I had the privilege of helping for a couple of hours at the Ipswich Winter Night Shelter, a programme organised by a number of churches to provide accommodation to up to 12 homeless people every night from early December to the middle of March. The guests are welcomed by wonderful volunteers who provide a delicious home cooked meal, plenty of time for socialising and conversation, and a bed for the night.

In the midst of this community of volunteers and guests, one of the guests said, “when I come here I feel human again”.

The stories of the guests are very close to our stories, except that for most of us, the catastrophic coincidence of events has not happened, and we have not found ourselves without somewhere to live, somewhere to call home. And for those that are living with that devastating confluence of events, it is inevitable that confidence and sense of worth is undermined.

When she said, 'I feel human again', it was not just about being warm, being dry, having somewhere to rest, having a good meal.

It was also about how she was treated by her hosts – as a guest, not a client. As one beloved, not as one more statistic. It was about becoming herself again, her valued self. The hosts in their kindness and selflessness, themselves becoming the people they are created to be, were helping her do the same.

Becoming who we are made to be. We can all think of examples, whether we have been in the place of the volunteer or of the homeless person, giving or receiving, in which all of us receive the gift of our humanity. People reach out to people, and each helps the other to become human. It happens because we live out of those deepest human qualities – generosity, selflessness, kindness, love.

Qualities God has given humanity, and revealed in their completeness in Jesus.

In our hearts we know this: we seem to have an instinct for the best humanity can be, we recognise it when we see it, and respond with gratitude. And that instinct, that desire, becomes particularly sharp, particularly acute, and collectively acute, at Christmas.

As we jostle with the tinsel and baubles, getting the tree and the presents, the logistics and planning, the cooking and the preparations, as

we emerge into those few hours today that all that has been leading towards, we are trying to practice whom God intends us to be.

We reach out and are kind and generous to one another; we make space for one another, as we come together as families and friends, we even make allowances as we listen to aunt Ethel's story that she tells every year, and Uncle Jack's slightly off-colour jokes.

We are polite where on other occasions we might be, well, less so – munching appreciatively through overcooked turkey and proclaiming how delightfully full we are to avoid what looks suspiciously like last year's Christmas pudding.

We are responding to whom we have seen as we stand on tiptoe behind the shepherds, the gift of our true humanity. We have seen the generosity, selflessness, kindness, and overwhelming love of God revealed in a baby, and we want to be like him.

And of course we do not confine this to family and friends, or our colleagues and neighbours. At Christmas people instinctively reach out to those in need, the poor, the lonely, indeed, the homeless. We give money, we give time, we give our selves and we receive in return.

Christmas is about us becoming human because God has become human.

In choosing to be utterly immersed in our earthly existence by becoming one of us, God has blessed every one of us.

By joining the human race, God has lifted up every human being and declared the worth and value of every single one of us around the world. By the incarnation, God is not just intimately joined to us, but reveals how we are joined to each and to every other human.

So of course we want to celebrate and inhabit our best humanity with our family and friends at Christmas, and of course we want to do all sorts of things to help others, and to be helped, in becoming more truly human.

And of course we are renewed in our instinct, our desire, to be this all year round. We know we will fall short, and the journey with Jesus to Good Friday and Easter brings us face to face with the humanity's sin, but the gift of the baby at Christmas inspires us to aspire.

We have lived through a very challenging year, and the lorry attack in Berlin is the latest experience of one aspect of that challenge, beginning in 2016 with the bombings in Brussels. It has been a year of extraordinary political upheaval in the west, which has brought profound questions and profound uncertainty.

As we look into 2017 most of us can only imagine it will be at least as challenging. But we know the humanity we are called to live, whatever the challenges, we know because of Christmas, because Jesus, that we are called to lives of generosity, selflessness, kindness, and love.

And by the grace of God coming among us, may we each this coming year play our part so that some among the frightened, the poor, the terrorised, the refugees, the homeless, the desperate, will be able to stand and say “I feel human again.”