

Sermon preached by the Rev'd Canon Philip Banks
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sunday 24 December 2017
The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Interruption in Time

Years ago I was a tutor for the Chelmsford diocesan Course in Christian Studies. I still recall the young man studying to be a Reader. He was brought up to believe that every word in the bible had to be taken as literal truth. As he compared the start of St Luke and St Matthew's gospels he became very troubled, because to his horror he discovered that they couldn't be fitted together to form a cohesive narrative. He hadn't yet learned that that the gospels are not biographies: yes, they do have some biographical details and some history, but the gospels are FAITH stories. Those who wrote them, before they put pen to parchment, they had a personal view of Jesus which they wanted to communicate to their readers in order to bring others to a faith in Jesus. Our young man had to learn that the differences found in the gospels reflect different interpretations of Jesus.

Now, you may think that knowing this does not affect me right now as I sit here in the cathedral with things yet to do rushing through my mind. Whether to have brandy butter or custard with my Christmas pudding for instance might be occupying your mind... Background information about the gospels isn't exactly on your priority list.

Yet here we are on the fourth Sunday of Advent, and on the eve of the event which is one of the crucial foundations of what shapes us as Christians. So I'm going to plough on. Because

when we read about Jesus in the gospels (and don't forget that the birth of Jesus is only recorded in two of the gospels), whilst they might not be compatible when it comes to actual happenings – times, succession of events and so forth – yet they DO agree on what it all means.

And what is that? It is that, in Jesus, God acted decisively in human history, and that there was an interruption of the continuity of normal human generations, conceived of the Holy Spirit, described in today's gospel: a new start – a new birth – was given to the human race.

That's what the doctrine of the virgin birth is all about.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent as we focus on Mary's part in our salvation, the point about the virgin birth is that, IN JESUS, God offers a new start to the human race!

Am I distracting you from custard and Christmas pudding yet? I hope so, because what we believe, what Christians believe, what the gospel writers believed, is that in Jesus we see the HUMAN face of God.

YES, God is *other* than us, different from us, beyond us – he transcends us, is the almighty, the reality at the heart of all things, the beginning and the end of all things and time, a mysterious Trinity.

And yet in the birth of Jesus, God is also saying to us “I have been a baby, a boy, a man, and I know what it is to be human, and to stand where you stand, and to suffer and to weep, and to experience joy. Turn – look too at my human and tender side”. And because that's true (God truly becoming human) it should affect the way I see God, the way I relate to God, the way I then relate to other people – and the way I prepare for and celebrate Christmas.

So NOW, yes, is the time to awake out of sleep and of a preoccupation with food, and to ask ourselves “How is my relationship with God? How am I responding to his human,

tender heart who loves me and all people? Do I really believe that God is with me in my common humanity when I'm hurting or laughing?"

This virgin birth offers us a new beginning, a new birth in the gift of that holy child.

As Christmas Day dawns tonight, let us remember to drink in the truth of this story of outrageous and wonderful grace – God becoming fully human – and know that the God we worship and adore is always with us, in all that we do, yes even as we make custard or brandy butter and recall “How silently, How silently the wondrous gift is given”.

By the way, in case you're wondering, I do prefer custard with my Christmas pudding.

Philip Banks, December 2017
[check against delivery]

Welcome all wonders in one sight!
Eternity shut in a span.
Summer in winter, day in night,
heaven in earth and God in man.
Great little one whose all-embracing birth
brings earth to heaven, stoops heaven to earth.

Richard Crashaw, 17th-century