

Advent 4, Year B

There's a rather good book called 'What is the point of being a Christian'. It was written by Timothy Radcliffe, a monk sometimes on the radio and TV. He's recently written another one that says amongst other things that coming to church shouldn't be about being made to feel cosy and comfortable, and reminding us of childhood securities, but should be about being challenged to move on in our spiritual journey. We should leave church feeling uncomfortable, provoked.

This chimes in with what I said a few weeks ago about how we move the church away from being a haven for cuddly toy services and 'Jesus is my friend so nothing bad will happen'. It's a particular problem at this time of year when people come to church and—I kid you not—complain if Santa doesn't put in an appearance. Santa, that well known figure present at the crib according to the Gospel of St Melanie. This is one of the reasons why many clergy feel uncomfortable with Christmas. Uncomfortable is a word I'd associate with Mary today. She was clearly very uncomfortable at the news from Gabriel, despite him (yes, angels are hims) trying to butter her up a bit first.

What this story is about is the Divine Lord making a home for himself. Let's look at the history of this. In Holy Scripture, humans have from time to time tried to make a home for the Divine Lord. When David and others tried to build a house for the Ark of the Covenant, that is what they were doing, for the Ark was where YWHLW 'resided' [Hooray for Indiana Jones films]. Then there's the Lord's house in the Temple, in that part beyond the veil. When the Jews talk about 'beyond the veil', they're talking about the place where YWHLW resides, and where only the high priest may go, and go only once a year.

Do you see that when we humans try to build a home for the Lord, we limit the lord, we try to keep him in a box (for example), or a particular part of a particular room. Do you see that the rending of the veil of the Temple that happens at the crucifixion/resurrection is the explosion of Christ into the world? And at the Ascension, an explosion into the cosmos.

This is the real meaning of the Christmas story—not humanity building a house for the Divine Lord, but the Divine Lord making his home in humanity—in Mary's uterus, and then at the nativity bursting out into the world.

Now let me tell you what goes on in a woman's uterus.

- the embryo burrows into the uterine lining;
- maternal blood bathes cells of the embryo;
- nutrients pass from mother to embryo, and waste products from embryo to mother;
- cells of the embryo penetrate deep into maternal tissues; some of them replace cells that line maternal arteries, and some are carried elsewhere within the mother;
- the embryo manufactures hormones, some of which pass into the mother's blood stream.

So, in Mary's uterus,

- divine cells penetrate deep into, and are surrounded by, Mary's tissue;
- divine cells spread throughout Mary during her pregnancy;
- Mary and the embryonic Christ sustain each other and exchange substances;
- divine cells are left behind in Mary after she has been delivered of her Son. She has been changed, as are all women changed by every pregnancy.

This combination of biology and theology is, I think, original to me. Some theologians are encouraging me to publish it – including Rowan Williams. I tell you this not to show off, but to show that these are not just the incoherent ramblings of an ordained idiot, but that they have if not divine approval, the next best thing that the CoE can offer.

Mary is indeed special: she has cells and fluids of the Christ-embryo invading her and so she is, as Holy Scripture says, indeed Blessed. But hold on a minute Mary, blessed as she is, is one of us. A human being. And we, like Mary, can let the Divine Lord grow within us as she did in her. And the word *grow* is important. The Divine Lord in Mary grew too big for her uterus. The Divine Lord came out of Mary's nether regions to walk in the world. There is no anatomical organ, or Ark, or part of a temple that can contain the Divine Lord. The last thing we should do is try and limit it in any way whatsoever. The Divine Lord can grow within us, if we let it. The question is: how do we let it burst out of us to spread throughout the world.

Now put this in the context of church growth. In the post this week came an invitation to a diocesan afternoon on Saturday 7 February where we consider how we can get our churches to grow up and grow out. This matters: look around you. How many of us will be here in 10 years time, in 20 years time? You see why it matters.

It would be good to have some of you interested in coming with me. Church is not just about spending all our money on maintaining the building, or just about trying to maintain an image of church that we approve of because it's what we grew up with. It's certainly not about making us feel comfortable. It's about how we burst through these walls and make an impact on the local community and the world in which we live.

We might well be frightened as we realise the extent of this challenge. Mary was frightened when she was invited to be the enabler of growth. She didn't know how painful it was going to be to watch what they did to him whom she had nurtured. As an example of saying 'yes' to the Divine Lord, she is unique and outstanding and to be honoured above all other humans. And so we have a duty with the Angel to say Hail Mary, full of grace, ...