

The First Sunday after Christmas, 2024

Luke 2:41-end (and, crucially, preached after 'Away in A Manger'!)

What would Christmas be like without 'Away in a Manger'?

Maybe you love it. Maybe for you it just catches the essence of the season. Leaving it out would be like not having turkey or crackers or Wham on the radio.

Me, I could lose it quite happily. I find it almost unbearably twee. And what's worse, it's verging on the heretical: that is, on teaching about Jesus which is just plain wrong, dangerously wrong.

By which I mean that line, 'the cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes.'

Now, I grant you, it is possible that now and again, the baby Jesus didn't cry. Even when he had just woken up and was hungry and there were large creatures mooing in the background. It is conceivable that, just once, he didn't.

But he probably did. Because that's what babies do. And the whole point of Christmas is that he was an ordinary baby.

Well, you might say, not the *whole* point. Surely the *whole* point is that he was God. So, actually, not an *ordinary* baby. Anything but an *ordinary* baby. No: Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing. The one in the manger is God.

Well, here is the mind-bending thing about Christmas. What we teach is that he was both, at one and the same time, a perfectly ordinary baby, *and* God-made-flesh.

Pleased *as man* with man to dwell. *As man*. Truly human. But, simultaneously, with no contradiction, no competition, truly God. Human, and divine. You don't affirm one by denying the other.

Which means, among other things, that the baby cried. He burped and weed and pooped and smiled and screamed and did everything that babies do. God made flesh did it, because that's what flesh does.

And He did a lot more too. As the final verse of today's Gospel reading puts it, he increased in wisdom and in years. He increased in wisdom, and in years. Years, of course, are quite straightforward. But wisdom? Many Christians found this one quite difficult to get their heads round. How could God get wiser? Get more mature, learn things? Wasn't he God? Didn't he know everything already? These kind of questions led some early Christians to say, in fact, that *really* the personal bits of Jesus, as it were, his mind, soul, will, intelligence, call it what you will, *these* didn't have to grow at all. They were just perfect from the beginning. Wrapped in human flesh, sure, but not themselves really human. Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see.

Well, there was a massive fight in the early Church about that. And that side, the one that said the mind or soul or personality of Jesus wasn't really human, that the spiritual bits were divine, and only the physical bits human, lost. Lost decisively. They lost on the one hand because people realised that a human being without a really human mind or soul isn't really a human being at all; and, on the other, because of bible texts like Luke 2, verse 52: 'Jesus increased in wisdom.' The little Lord Jesus, the church decided, not only cried but got to grow up in every way a human being does: physically, mentally, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. He is God, yes. But God incarnate, and incarnate means living and growing as one of us.

Even after the argument was won, though, it proved difficult to keep it won. Everyone agreed, because they had to, that of course Jesus had a human mind and soul. But often that agreement proved pretty threadbare. So many theologians would say, for instance, that of course Jesus, because he was perfect, because he was God, could never really make a mistake about anything. If there had been such a thing as Nazareth Primary School, he would never have got a sum wrong. Or if he had, by some wild chance, met a Chinese man, he could have conversed with him instantly in Chinese. He wouldn't have to *learn* Chinese. He wouldn't have to stumble and misunderstand and get things wrong, because he already knows everything. And anytime it looks like he doesn't know everything – like, for instance, that strange verse in the Gospels where he says he doesn't know when the world will end – well, on those occasions, he must have been – for his own good reasons, no doubt -bluffing.

Well, the good news is that though many, many Christians have thought like that, we're absolutely not meant to do so. To deny that Jesus genuinely had to learn things, could genuinely be surprised, genuinely get things wrong, would be, really, to deny that he was truly human. To imagine a human being who really knew everything, and what's more, knew everything without having had to *learn* it, is to imagine an impossibility. It's like trying to imagine a square circle, or silent music.

No, Christianity teaches that God chooses to live in one of us, as one of us. That is, God chooses to live within exactly the same limitations as us, to obey the rules of our nature – spiritual and intellectual, as much as physical. At one level, he is indeed just an ordinary baby, just an ordinary man. The rules don't get changed, or even bent. God puts himself into humanity without destroying it, just as back in the Old Testament the bush was ablaze and yet not consumed.

And yet, the one living within those constraints is truly God. Is, that means, perfect goodness, perfect wisdom, perfect beauty, perfect love, perfect everything-we-mean-by 'Glory'. That fullness pours itself into this smallness: into Jesus the embryo, the infant, the child, the mature adult, the crucified victim, the resurrection and the life. At each stage, the fullness does not destroy the smallness, but shows it in perfection.

And watching that happen, what we learn is that smallness *per se*, limitation *per se* is not the problem. It doesn't matter that Jesus didn't know Chinese, any more than it does that he had to learn to walk, or that he was once, in the womb, only centimetres long. Being limited, physically, and in every other way, is part of what we are. That's being human. The Little Lord Jesus, much crying he made.

What's not human, though – and this, in a way, is the wonderful point of the Gospel – is sin. The failure to love, the grasping, hoarding, fearful, anxious, violent way of being that seems to permeate so much, so much so that we end up calling it 'human nature' – it turns out, in Jesus, that it's not human nature, not at all. That's distorted, damaged, screwed-up, failed humanity. It turns out, in Jesus, that it's not inevitable at all. We don't have to be like this. Better still, we *won't* be like this. That because of Him, a great transformation has begun. That all the toxic, tired, sludge we have piled into ourselves is being purged, that our true human nature is being restored, that we are are being made once again the bearers of divine glory.

That's the story that begins at Christmas. That's the Gospel that changes everything. May it sink ever deeper into our hearts, and bear fruit ever more richly and widely in our lives, into 2025 and beyond.

In Jesus' name. Amen.