

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

Science is finally confirming something that the Christian church has been teaching for two millennia. Humans were created by a word. And not just any old word, but a principle of intelligent speech. Two million years ago the first beginnings of near-human speech occurred. According to scientists, it was the development of speech that drove the evolution of the human brain. It wasn't that our brains gave us the ability to communicate. Rather, the communicative needs of earliest humanity led to the development of the intellectual processing power to accommodate our linguistic needs. And all this took a very long time. Apparently the evolution of human communication took the bulk of the last couple of million years to get anywhere near the kind of social speech that we know today. If you think waiting for Christmas takes a long time, just thank God that you weren't hanging around waiting for that point two hundred thousand years ago when linguistic processes finally arrived that could give us social speech. Language that has created us, and without language humanity would simply not exist.

The story of Christmas is remarkably similar. Tonight on this holiest of nights we celebrate and give thanks for the creative the power of speech. For in the tiny babe lying in a manger Christians are asked to see beyond a defenseless infant to the ordering principle of cosmic intelligence.

Luke's Gospel tells us that we are asked to see the Messiah, the Lord in that tiny infant. But it is John's Gospel more than any other text that reminds us that it is God acting as the principle of intelligent speech who is born in the manger.

Taken together Luke and John give us all the elements we need to understand the extraordinary mystery of the Christmas story. And be in no doubt it is a wild, strange, imaginative story. And like the best stories it is not always clear in the Christmas story where the lines blur or overlap between fact, fiction and fantasy. But on one thing Luke, John and evolutionary scholars all agree: a word comes first, and through speech the mystery of humanity evolves.

Christianity has wanted to go further, of course, and claim that it is God who creates speech in the same act as creating the cosmos. Luke's angels make it clear that the son born to Mary is not simply a prestigious religious figure but a human who is to be completely identified with God.

It is good to be reminded that this news was greeted not first with joy but with terror and fear by the shepherds. I believe the Christian story should continue to strike terror and fear into our hearts. For unless we first feel the terror and the fear of the shepherds, we will never know the true meaning of the comfort and the peace that is the gift of the Christ child.

For too long we have domesticated the story of Christ's birth and made it sound remarkably ordinary. And on one level we are right to do so. Jesus like Mary his mother was no alien guest from another planet. Like us he had DNA and RNA and the whole panoply of molecular and biochemical make-up that every human being on this planet shares. Like us Jesus was vulnerable and dependent upon others. And like us Jesus had physical, emotional and psychological needs.

But if our story stops with the sharing of a familiar humanity we risk losing the essential uniqueness of the person whose birth we celebrate today. The Christian claim is not that a particularly good or kind or friendly human being was born this night. Nor do Christians claim that a human being was born with vast brainpower or a superior understanding. No, throughout its history the Christian church has consistently taught one thing, and one thing only about the infant.

But before we get to that, I want to share with you one of the most extraordinary Christmas letters I received from a scientist friend who lives in Scotland. As is often the case with distant friends we don't keep up as well as we should, and his annual Christmas letter has always been something I have looked forward to. Last year though there was no letter. So imagine my joy when I saw one from him a couple of days ago. I eagerly opened the envelope and started reading. But immediately I was caught up short. My friend had written to tell me about his recent visit to the planet Mars. For two pages of typescript he described in extraordinary detail the journey to Mars and the difficulties of space travel. He even included one of the famous tourist photos from one of the more popular Martian tourist destinations.

There is one thing about the letter that I can say with a hand on my heart that is true in the generally accepted meaning of the word 'true'. And that is that my friend wrote it. Other than that it was a complete fantasy. But it was a fantasy with a point. And the point was that after a two year absence dealing with a life threatening illness he and his partner were now back with their feet on firm ground again.

Sometimes it is the extraordinary fantasies and fictions that communicate truth better than any amount of reportage, realism or even science. And when we approach the figure of Jesus the one thing we are asked to celebrate is something that is surely the most outrageous and ridiculous of claims. Tonight we are told, as Mary and the shepherds were told before us, that God the author and creator of all has come among us.

You have no doubt heard it before, that God was one of us. But reflect a little tonight on how bizarre, unseemly and simply quite unbelievable that claim is. Eternity in mortality, the infinite in the finite. This is not just a heady claim, it is unspeakably outlandish and, yes, it does not make sense. But like my friend's letter it is a controversial claim that hides a deeper truth.

I've always thought that the most important things are often the hardest to vocalize. But in Christ, we are shown how God somehow speaks the unspeakable. God tells us not through words or ideas that God loves us. Rather, God tells us through the gift of his own Son that God loves us to the extent of not wanting to be separate from us. That God loves us so radically and so enormously, *that* is the one consistent thing that the Christian church teaches about Christmas.

And that love is also the one thing that Christians are asked to share with the world. This holy night look within yourself and see if you can feel some of the astonishment and wonder of that first Christmas. Recover the sense of the extraordinary, from the terror of the shepherds to the amazement of those who listened to them. And like Mary treasure and ponder the news that is God come to earth. For where you treasure and ponder the outrageous claims of the Christmas mystery, there Christ will be born once again. May your heart be filled with joy; may you shine as a light to the glory of God; and may

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you never become indifferent to the peace and love that is God's gift in Christ. For in Christ heaven is brought to earth, and earth is brought to heaven. Amen.