

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

They say that the church is like a swimming pool. All the noise comes from the shallow end.

And if you were to judge the church from most of what we read and see in the media it certainly looks like the shallow end is thriving. Everything from denouncing a movie they have not seen, to preachers of intolerance, plenty of noise continues to come from the shallow end. And within our own denomination there are those who seek to turn the clock back to a fictional version of the seventeenth century. People who would silence women in the church and persecute faithful Christians living within same sex partnerships.

It is enough to make one fed up. And it makes one question having anything to do with an institution that is meant to be about God's love. After all, if we in the church who are meant to love one another cannot, what hope is there for our world?

Of course none of this is new. Nowhere in the course of human history have we seen an institution that has so consistently failed to practice its own beliefs. From crusaders who slaughtered the innocent, to terrors meted out on supposed witches and heretics. To the racism, xenophobia and militarism that even today flourish where people believe that God is on their side and no one else's. It is enough to make one weep.

I believe that God weeps too. For the fact is you will not find God in the shallow end. Tonight as we celebrate Christ's birth, we remember that the only place you will consistently find God is in the depths; specifically the depths of love. And tonight God shows God's own self to be found in the love of a mother for a child.

If God really was incarnate, made flesh, in the raw vulnerability of that tiny swaddled infant we have to look again at what it means to go to church. And we have to think again about how committed we are to searching out the depths of God's love.

I suspect that there are as many different reasons to go to church as there are people here tonight. Each of them worthy in their own way and each of them unique.

But tonight we are all reminded that for God the church is also meant to be the revealer of a deep mystery. A mystery about how the purest and deepest Love comes to be fused with our humanity. This is a mystery that can remain hidden from the brainiest and the brightest. It is also a mystery that remains concealed from those in the shallow end. But tonight God shows us that this living mystery of love made human is what our faith is all about.

Love is our first, our last, our *only* reality in the church. All else is decoration. And tonight we rejoice how in the baby Jesus God makes the most definitive manifestation of

love. But if that is all we celebrate we are only half way there.

Tonight we are also asked to see that the love of our own human experience is somehow connected to the love manifest in Christ. And if we fail to love out of the depths of our own hearts, we risk becoming mere paddlers in the shallows.

Love like God is deep. And when navigating the deeps it is tempting to want to head for shore and for shallower waters. But the life of faith is one lived out in the deeps.

The deeps are where Mary and Joseph and the shepherds first gathered for Christ's birth. And today if our faith has any meaning, we must allow ourselves to be unmoored and unhinged from all that keeps us tied to the comforting outline of the coast.

Sailors know that in the shallows all manner of terrible fates await the unwary. But in the deeps, the best sailing is found. One of my favourite stories is from Homer, and I'm not referring to Homer Simpson. In Homer's *Odyssey* we hear of the great journeys of Odysseus, struggling to journey home to Ithaca. It was a story that would have been well known to the colonised literary world in which Jesus grew up. In one famous episode Odysseus asks to be bound to the mast of his ship in order not to be tempted by the Sirens. I believe that we too need to make a conscious decision to bind ourselves to what we hold dear. For if we are to keep our gaze fixed on the

love of God, we need help to stay on course. The reason we have the church is that God knows how much we need help in navigating the deeps. We cannot do it alone. And we are not perfect. But if we are willing to set sail in the ship of faith we can together learn and relearn God's forgiveness and love.

I pray that you will allow yourself to voyage out into the deeps of God's love. And as you do, remember the angel telling the shepherds not to be afraid. Infinite love can be scary. But unless we conquer our fear there will be no one to lead our world out of the shallows. Its up to us this Christmastide to remind the world that God's love is both wide and deep.

While Christmas begins with a baby, God needs us to make the incarnation real again. For wherever love is wholehearted, God is once more made present. So love in the name of God who forgives and loves all. Love without exception. And love this night and for evermore. Amen.