

Christmas Day

Luke 2.1-20

St Luke's, Chelsea

25 December 2021

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Well, my hints worked. This morning I was delighted to unwrap a bright, new thick cycling jacket. The lining of my old jacket had been flaking apart for some months. When I turned up to meetings my suit would all too often look like I was having a bad reaction to that morning's shampoo. But now I will be kept safe, dry, and, above all, warm as I go about my local duties.

When we look at classical European art depicting the moment when Mary and Joseph approach Bethlehem, we are typically shown a winter scene. That looks somewhat different depending on which part of Europe the painter was based in. In Italian paintings, for example, we have what from a British perspective often seems like a nice – albeit brisk – spring day. Whereas in Dutch paintings, the snow is lying heavy on the ground. Look at those Dutch paintings and you can almost feel the cold cutting through you, chilling your bones. You can imagine the donkey carrying Mary shivering as it ploughs, step by step, through the snowdrifts towards Bethlehem.

And yet, when we turn to paintings within the stable, regardless of what icy wind might have been whistling through the stable windows, there is one shared feature. The newborn Jesus isn't wearing much. There might be a swaddling cloth. But often, Jesus is left naked as all the adults and animals gather around to gaze at him.

And at that point I think back to the birth of my own Felicity eleven weeks ago. For one thing, the midwives at the Chelsea and Westminster would have had something to say if we had been at all remiss in not swaddling her to within an inch of her life. But I also remember the experience of picking her up in those early days, holding her to my cheek, and enjoying how warm she was. In one sense, that's a silly thought: she's a human; of course she's warm. But I think it was, for me, part of the wonder of new life. Felicity may only have appeared in this world a few hours before. But already she was an independent body, producing her own heat to keep her alive. Already she was melting hearts.

So when I see art of the nativity with this unclothed Jesus I think of Felicity. Christ's unclothed state speaks of the warmth given off and offered by every newborn baby. At every moment when we encounter the wonder of new life, like my holding Felicity, we ponder the mystery of a new creature coming into existence. We see their independence in the warmth that they give off. And, in turn, our hearts are warmed.

But the warmth of Christ that these Nativity paintings depict is even more than that. The radiant glow of the newborn Christ anticipates the one who will offer warmth throughout his life. The touch of welcome to those rejected by society. The warm tears that flow at the grave of his friend Lazarus. The kiss he gives to Judas when the disciple arrives to betray him. This is the warmth of human contact that speaks of love, friendship, and forgiveness. The Son of God gives out this warmth throughout his life to the next time we come across him naked and undefended; naked and undefended, with his hands nailed to the cross. There he will hang, still offering love, friendship, and forgiveness not just to those in Israel 2000 years ago, but even now to the whole world.

There is a chill outside today. The chill of the glum winter weather. The chill of a Christmas where so many are missing out on the hoped-for time with family and friends. And thanks to our Covid precautions, we worship aware of the chills: rather than sealing us off into a warm bubble, our open church door reminds us how we are drawn into this world of warmth and cold, light and dark.

And yet, I hope you will leave here today warm. Warmed, perhaps, by vigorous singing. But warmed above all by the hope offered by God coming to us in a vulnerable newborn baby. To paraphrase Saint John: the warmth remains despite the cold, and the cold does not overcome it. So I wish you tidings of comfort and joy, and a very merry Christmas.