

**Wenhaston
Midnight Mass
2011**

Let's go in our imagination to the beginning of the Universe. God says just one Word: 'Hayah' in Hebrew – 'Genetheto' in Greek – 'Fiat' in Latin – 'Let there be' in English.

A tiny spot of light appears, much smaller than a pin-head. In the first few milliseconds, it explodes far and wide, bright, wonderful and glorious. The Universe is born. Time begins to roll. Space expands.

The upshot of this is that you and I, and every human being, are made of star-dust, and God makes star-dust.

God willed time and space into being. He spoke just one Word and it all began to happen. Something like 3.6 to 3.8 billion years later, that Word became a human being in Jesus Christ. Jesus, God's first Word is also God's last Word, so if we want a relationship with God, with ultimate meaning and reality, we need to get to know Jesus in a much more than superficial way.

John wrote:

"And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth."

John's Gospel, from which Margaret read just now, doesn't mention angels, or shepherds or wise men. It doesn't mention Bethlehem, or stables or mangers. It gets straight to the point. It tells us that God became one of us. That changed everything, and it changes everything for us. We encounter God and God encounters us most fully when we gather as the Church Family to worship. The Church Family encounters him most fully in the Mass, in the Holy Communion, in the Eucharist, call it what you will.

We are not here tonight because of fairy stories. We are not here tonight because we have a warm but dim memory of being shepherds or angels in the school nativity, with tea-towels or tinsel on our heads. We are not here tonight because it is comforting, or because it seems the right thing to do at Christmas. We are not even here because we chose to come, but because God calls us and draws us to come. God always calls us to him, and because he is our heavenly Father; it is the most natural thing in the world to respond. It is strange and distinctly dissonant not to respond

Christian Worship is not just one of the choices we consider, a decision that would give God equal weight with football or cricket, with flower arranging or Weight-Watchers, with watching TV or going to a concert. Being in the Presence of God is in a wholly different order. It is about being true to ourselves, finding and becoming our true selves and discovering that which gives human life its true meaning.

Rebekah is a woman now, in her late twenties. She came to my church as a teenager to try to make sense of her difficult life. Her father was conspicuous by his absence and her mother found it incredibly difficult cope with family breakdown. Rebekah became depressed, although she found comfort in the Church Community and was confirmed into active membership. After she moved away from one of my former parishes, I lost touch with her for ten years. She wrote to me a while ago. She'd been through hell and back. Her depression had become severe and she had become an alcoholic. In her letter, she told me that she had found a parish priest and a congregation that cared for her, accepted her, and let her know that she was truly valued for herself. She is now well on the way to a stable and happy life.

Rebekah, made of stardust like you and me, is again in touch with her maker. Her life again begins to make sense practically, emotionally and spiritually. She feels she has come home, into the life of an active church that is concerned for her and not at all concerned whether or not she 'fits in' or is at all conventional. Obviously, the real Rebekah has been heavily disguised, but the story is essentially a true one.

Christmas trees, holly and mistletoe – turkey, sprouts and all the trimmings – the giving and receiving of gifts and the coming together of families - are all important parts of Christmas, but they are not at its heart. They are ways of

celebrating the most wonderful truth there is, that God became one of us; he loves us and will never, ever let us go.

Because God became one of us, we discover that he knows what it feels like to be in our shoes.

Think, for a moment, of what you have to celebrate. For example, you fall in love, and have a strong, steady relationship. You have a baby. You get promotion at work. You have a good holiday, which is both fun and refreshing. God celebrates alongside you, even if you don't always notice.

Think for a moment of the trials you have gone through, or are still going through: an illness, a difficult patch in a relationship, even the fracture of a relationship – the danger or reality of redundancy, or difficulty in paying the gas bill or the mortgage. At times like these, we are reminded of Jesus' teaching that only the things of God continue for ever. As you struggle, God struggles alongside you, sharing your pain, as thirty years later the infant Christ whom tonight we honour shared our death.

There is one crucial part in the carol we sang as the gradual hymn:

‘O holy child of Bethlehem,
descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin, and enter in,
be born in us today.’

Be born in us, be incarnate in us; let us be your body on earth today. That is what the Church is for. That is why the Church in Wenhaston must thrive and grow; that is why people must put all other things in their proper place after the worship of the one, true and living God. We have to be – we have to become – a community in which the Rebekahs of the world will thrive – a community in which *everyone* will thrive.

“And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father) full of grace and truth.”

God still needs stardust today. You and I are that stardust, the same stardust into which the Word became flesh; the stardust which today is organised into hand and eye and brain, memory and mind and spirit, thought and imagination and dreams.

People like Rebekah – and that's all of us, to some extent, at one time or another, learn that their hurts can be healed and their lives renewed by Christ within the Christian community.

God is with us, and at Christmastime and at *all* times, he longs for us to respond to him and worship.

Have a very blessed Christmas, and a truly blessed new year.