



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

Archbishop Stephen preached at York Minster on Christmas Day. This follows in full.

“For to us a child is born,

to us a son is given,

and the government will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called

Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

Isaiah 9. 6

I remember when I was a curate in South London many years ago, visiting a family for what I suppose must have been a baptism visit; in the course of the conversation the Mum asked me whether I would like to hold the baby.

At that point in my life, recently married but still no kids, and with none of my family and friends yet producing a next generation, I'm not sure if I had ever held a newborn baby before.

I wanted to say yes, because I like babies and it is wonderful to hold a little child, but I was also nervous. This baby was so small. So fragile. So precious. I know you're supposed to support the baby's head but wasn't sure how. But the child's mother clearly trusted me. She smiled, and gently handed the baby to me and showed me what to do.

And it was lovely to hold this tiny thing. And wonderful. And although I suppose we all know a newborn baby is really the most ordinary thing in the world - for instance it is estimated that about 2,200 babies will be born in the UK today, and, if you're interested, the most popular girls name will be Holly and for boys Gabriel, Nicholas or Noel – so no surprises there - each of these 2200 births today as well as being ordinary each birth is also miraculous and perfect. As parents, and even as onlookers and friends, we experience the birth of each new child as a glorious, glorious one off, and we marvel at a new child's fragile beauty. Those tiny hands. Those tiny feet. Those very, very tiny fingernails and eyelashes. A little person and a little miracle. And even though we know so much about how babies are born and where they come from, nevertheless 'miracle', 'wonder', 'astonishment' 'delight' this the language we use and certainly the emotions we feel.

On this Christmas morning, I wonder, is God asking us the same question? The question that Mother asked me all those years ago: 'Would you like to hold the baby?'

Is this the invitation of the Christian faith? Because this child is God's gift to us of God's own life, now emptied into and made visible in human life.

The word was made flesh and lived among us. And, therefore, vulnerable and tiny and in need of care. The one who made the world, the one who is all powerful, the one who is the source of everything, a tiny bundle of life placed into our hands. This Christ child that we are invited to hold and care for and then, in holding, learn from.

In the gift of this child, God is going to show us what our humanity can be. Show us how to care for and hold each other. Like a carpenter, sanding the rough surfaces of the wood, God is going to smooth and soften the abrasive edges of our certainties and our wilful pride. God is going to take our ego down a peg or two and lift our spirit high. God is going to show us how to love one another and how to receive one another as a gift. And it will be in receiving and holding this child that we will learn these lessons of peace. The lessons of peace, how we love one another, the things our world so urgently needs to learn and receive this Christmas.

And just as shepherds were summoned to the manger all those years ago and came and saw and held and worshipped, so we are invited today.

'Would you like to hold the child?', God is saying to us this Christmas Day.

And, yes, perhaps we feel a bit nervous. After all, this is not really how we expect God to be.

But we say yes. Isn't that why we're here in Church this morning?

We come to the manger. And even if we haven't said this to ourselves, yes, we would like to hold the baby.

Then, or at least in my imagination, as I think about these things, God smiles at us, like that mother smiled at me all those years ago.

'Well,', God says, 'if you're going to hold this baby, you're going to have to put down all that other stuff you're holding first.'

We are a bit taken aback. Surprised. But then we look into our arms and suddenly see as if for the first time, with horror and embarrassment just how much stuff is there and how it gets in the way of holding babies, of holding on to God.

So, God says, wherever you are, whoever you are, whatever the reason you're here this morning or if you're watching online, put down your phone. Silence its jabbering chatter. Close your laptop. Your tablet. Switch them off. Unplug them. Take off your headphones. Put down your magazines, your books, your newspapers, your wisdom, your opinions, your prejudices and your fears.

Put down your knife and fork. Put down your spoon. Put down all those other knives and guns and shields and weapons you're holding on to thinking they can save you and secure you. In fact, put down all your defences. They can't protect you. And they keep love at bay. Put down your greed. Put down your envy. Put down your anger. Put down your bitterness. Put down the idea that you cannot be loved, and have no love left for anyone else. Put down the notion that things can't change, that this is just the way it is, that dog eats dog. Put down your clever put downs.

Put down your cynicism. Your carefully rehearsed positions on everything. Put down your inflexible certainties. They are strangling you. Put down your silly fear of strangers. Unsaddle your high horse. Get off the fence. Put down your delight in other people's failings. Put down your low opinion of yourself. Put down the regret that gnaws inside you and prevents you moving forward.

Put down the things you thought you needed. Your coat, your hat, your broly, your scarf, your gloves, your wallet, your armour, your second pair of everything, your security. Put down even the inverted pride that makes you think you are not worthy and would never be asked to hold onto God in the first place.

Because dear Friends, God is speaking to you. God trusts you. God is holding out his Christ to you.

So. Unclench your fist. Open your eyes. Hold out your empty hands, like you do when you receive communion.

'Now', says God, 'you are ready: would you like to hold the baby?' Amen.

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