

The Call the Midwife Christmas special is a bit of a favourite in our house. I used to visit the order of nuns who are portrayed in it. They now live in Birmingham and are a very special group of women. Six years ago the Call the Midwife Christmas special was replete as usual with poor young women giving birth, not in stables but usually in less than ideal situations. And these births were portrayed in a surprisingly realistic fashion. Enough to put you off your sausage roll. Meanwhile, at the other end of the class spectrum, in the Downton Abbey Christmas special, Lady Mary gave birth to a little boy. George. Babies seemed to be everywhere.

But I probably noticed these babies more because we were expecting a birth in my family. Not my immediate family I hasten to add. But a new nephew whose parents live near Cambridge. He had been due on 22<sup>nd</sup> December but nothing much happened until Christmas Eve. We had a house full of relatives. Some of them were getting rather anxious, waiting for the phone to ring. On Christmas morning there was not much news, but during the morning service when it was time to exchange the peace, I was informed by my family that the waters had broken.

My family had been texting during the sermon. Not something I encourage I assure you. The day continued with occasional updates and was followed by a rather sleepless night for some. Finally a son was born on Boxing Day, weighing six pounds nine ounces. His name was Herbert James Ashley. He was lucky. Rudolph is a family name. (Bertie, as he is now known, is here today).

I don't tend to get a lot of sleep at Christmas. It is my busy time after all as many people remind me. And that year a lack of sleep gave a particularly surreal dimension to events both real and on the television. Art and life seemed to fuse together and it was hard to know where one ended and the other began. Of course, both the real and the dramatised births all happened in the context of another birth. One that happened two thousand years ago in a stable behind an inn in a small town south of Jerusalem called Bethlehem. And in the strange wonderland that is Christmas, births past present and imagined somehow blended into one.

We don't know exactly when the birth of Jesus took place. The church calendar would have us believe that the birth of Jesus took place exactly on time, nine months to the day from the annunciation, and without any complications. In many ways it was a very ordinary birth and yet it continues to affect us, even when we are not tired and emotional, all these years later. It inspires artists and poets. Musicians and film-makers.

Because in this birth we see something of ourselves. This story reflects our humanity back to us as art does. Birth is a universal thing. It touches all of us in one way or another at some point in our lives. Even if we are not parents, we are aunts and uncles. Friends and neighbours. Subjects of future kings or just TV watchers. Birth catches us and gives us hope and reminds us of the miracle of life. And in it we see something of the divine. Something of the God who created us and keeps creating us. Giving us life and filling us with potential. In the unfocussed eyes of a new born baby we perhaps catch a glimpse of eternity. A wisdom that is beyond this world. And we may feel a love that is superhuman that comes from somewhere beyond us. In the birth of a baby we see not just ourselves but God.

And yet how quick we are to forget. To forget the miracle that is our life. The God in whose image we are made. The child in whom all our hopes and fears are met. We have allowed that child to become a refugee, an asylum seeker. We have allowed that child to be abused or neglected or to live in poverty. We have ignored that child as Jesus was ignored by all but a few dirty shepherds and some foreigners. Tucked out of sight in a dirty stable. And we have ignored that child in ourselves. Each of us carries the divine spark. The God particle. We have an enormous capacity for self-giving love. But in the hectic rush and the cut and thrust part of us may have been damaged, lost, hidden away. We have grown hardened, jaded or perhaps just tired. We don't mean it to but it does.

Most of us had this capacity to love and be vulnerable as children. The capacity for self-forgetfulness. For wonder. Jesus tells us that if we want to enter the kingdom of heaven we need to become like children again. Trusting. Vulnerable, and open. We need to become like that baby lying in a manger, born again to love and be loved. "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."

And for that we need God's help. So often he is the part of us that seems to be missing. He is the thing that we tend to forget in our busy, noisy world. But not today. Today is different to all other days. Today we see not just ourselves but God lying in that manger. Today the veil that divides earth and heaven grows thin, and God comes to us. The word made flesh. And he invites us to remember. To remember him. To remember ourselves.

God comes to us in the word made flesh and in bread and wine. He does not force himself upon us. He is, after all, just a tiny baby lying in a manger. But he invites us. All of us. Today at this celebration all are welcome at God's table. Young and old. Rich and poor. Those who believe and those who struggle to believe. Today all are welcome and no one is to be forgotten. Amen.