

Carol Service Sermon Jesus College 30 November 2014

In nomine...

“You’ve really blown my Facebook mind”. Was a quotation from one of you, who sadly is unable to be here, but knows she (or he?) is being quoted. I was delighted to hear it. Not that *I* would ever be capable of blowing someone’s “Facebook mind”... But because these few words express (a) the typical student desire to be “connected” via some kind of i-gadget or the latest thing to be “trending”; and (b) the delight of being astonished by something new and seemingly extraordinary.

The extraordinary. Jesus is quite good at connecting the ordinary with the extraordinary. We eat – an ordinary pastime – in a great 17th century hall – extraordinary. We dress – a regular human occurrence – in gowns and black and white and ribbons and funny hats – extraordinary. We work – a necessary part of everyday human life – by sitting and reading and writing in ancient libraries and talking about high-falutin ideas with people even cleverer than us – extraordinary. Each of you are very ordinary – but pretty extraordinary too.

Life in Oxford is full of extraordinary connections. Exeter College – and Middle Earth. Your Chaplain – and Wahoo.

But perhaps the most extraordinary connection of all is the connection between God and humanity. It’s mind-boggling to picture a wealthy tax-evader setting off to be a nurse in Sierra Leone – but possible. It’s imagination-stretching to think of a great Admiral taking vows as a monk – but possible. And it is certainly hard to conjure up an image of a God who chooses to forgo an untouchable, unsullied, pain-free divine existence, and chooses instead to take a place in physical, earthy, suffering, life-and-death humanity.

Extraordinary indeed: that God should choose to limit himself in mortality. Extraordinary indeed: that God should take on flesh, able to touch and be touched, vulnerable to contagion, vulnerable to wounds, open to suffering.

It is the extraordinary that we remember. Some of you apparently still remember the sermon about the Tardis. Yes, that was certainly extraordinary theology. You will remember the extraordinary moments of Freshers' Week much more than the rest of it. I know many of you have had extraordinary experiences that you know you have to come to terms with, extraordinary stories that make you who are and what you will be.

And it is the extraordinariness of the Christmas story that makes it worth remembering, worth believing – and worth letting it shape your life. That's not to say that you have to buy into all the extraordinary detail of it – speaking drily, certainly textual variations mean we might want to think carefully and be able to reason about how far we take it all as *fact*. But we can be prepared to *wonder* at it, *note* its extraordinariness, and note the even more extraordinary fact that despite its downright astonishing nature it has continued to be passed on. Why? Because there's something valuable about the story. Because – however far the historical fact goes – tonight's story expresses a *truth*. Because that truth is about the greatest connection ever – between God and man.

Extraordinary stories: Prophets, Mary and Joseph, Shepherds, Magi, and the Christ child. Prophets are basically extraordinary anyway. Why would anyone want to risk losing their being seen as “normal”, being listened to, having a place in society, for the sake of saying difficult truths and proclaiming wierd things? Isaiah, and all the “prophet-bards” of the Old Testament, definitely put their necks on the line. They *must have had good reason* to stick their heads

above the parapets. And that good reason was based in their experiences of God, which they could not deny or shut up about. Too extraordinary to be contained. Extraordinary enough to be taken notice of.

Mary and Joseph. Well, frankly, that's pretty extraordinary. Not just that she got pregnant without any kind of physical interaction; but that Joseph didn't dump her. That's *really* extraordinary if you think about it. And - bizarre at the very least, for Mary to base her story on some angel knocking at her door. Who would believe that? And who on earth, being about to give birth to her first child, would really travel right then, without making plans about where to stay? I mean, I know they didn't do lastminute.com, but if they had ancestors in Bethlehem, surely they could have done something else? Wasn't Joseph taking an unbelievable risk? How could they have done all that? Extraordinary: that they could – and both chose to – say “yes”.

The Shepherds. Well, these guys were not particularly impressive types in the eyes of society. Think of the jobs you'd only do if you were desperate. Shelf-stacking in the middle of the night. Emptying bins and clearing up after arrogant passers-by had just thrown their rubbish onto the streets. Being one of those call-centre people who just have to keep picking up the handset and asking stranger after stranger if they will buy your latest financial product. That was the kind of field that the shepherds were in. A smelly field, a cold field, a dark field, an unpleasant field, a dangerous field. They were doing something, being something, that no one would choose. They were shunned. So – extraordinary that its *these guys* we're talking about seeing angels. Extraordinary that they left their livelihoods and stumbled down the mountains in the dark to find a random outhouse where a baby had just been born. And can you imagine wandering into a stranger's arms and saying “I want to worship your baby? No, we've never met.” A story so astonishing it has been remembered, retold, for two millennia. I mean, shepherds...? Now that *is* extraordinary.

And the Magi. Who knows whether there were in fact three, whether or not they were kings, wise men, magicians, or whatever? But this particular extraordinary story tells of travellers from a long way away. Following a star. Hello? Now I know they did things differently then, but - *really?* These chaps were dreamers, off-the-wall. They made a difficult and apparently unnecessary journey on a complete whim. They got on their knees before a baby... OK, I know that babies can be extraordinarily cute – I have totally fallen for my baby niece, and yes, I have got on my knees before her – but there's a difference between a doting aunty and three foreign blokes who've just walked hundreds of miles before the advent of the motor car. And I may only have bought my niece a hand-puppet – but they gave to this stranger-baby masses of grown-up, expensive presents. So yes, *hashtag* extraordinary.

Four extraordinary stories with extraordinary characters. But they – and those who tell their stories - *all had their reasons*. To connect God and mankind is extraordinary, and this is an extraordinary way of going about it. So extraordinary we are challenged to believe there might be some... truth in it.

Because – Jesus. God in a cradle. Extraordinary. God all bloody, squeezed out of a young girl's womb, the umbilical cord cut – and not with a beautiful shiny pair of surgical scissors. God gasping for breath. God crying, God sleeping, God lying amongst cattle, in hay several months' old. God - who gave himself, his son, to humanity, without holding back. Why?

Because God wants to connect. To give us a story, give us a Word, that has a life of its own. A story, a Word, that gives us Life.

And – well – he had to do something that would make us sit up and listen, didn't he?