

Sermon by the Revd Canon Dr Matthew Hill, for the First Sunday of Christmas, 29 December 2019, preached at Evening Prayer, at St Davids Cathedral.

If I thought of God as being a being just like myself, only infinitely more powerful, I would consider it my duty to defy him. So said the Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, sentiments with which I wholly agree

If I thought of God as being a being just like myself, only infinitely more powerful, I too would consider it my duty to defy him. Because, ultimately, he would be no better than I am, and, therefore, would not be God.

If you've been watching the adaption of Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* on BBC 1, that is exactly how *the Authority* is portrayed. *The Authority* is what the magisterium worships. If you've not read the books I'm afraid this is a spoiler alert, it turns out that *the Authority* is not God, but a being who is just like us only much more powerful.

That is not the opposite of the God who became human in the person of Jesus, that we celebrate at this Christmas time. The Son, the Logos, who, as the letter to the Phillipians puts it, Emptied himself, or perhaps a better translation would be, *poured himself out*, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.

The God revealed in the birth of Jesus is not the opposite of a being just like us, it's something **completely** different. Trying to say that it is the opposite would be like trying to say something ridiculous like, Blue is the opposite of ham

We are not dealing with opposing conceptions, with a thesis and an antithesis, **they are completely different conceptions of God.**

In the Incarnation, in the becoming human of God in the birth of Jesus, we have to remember that God does not come to us **in disguise**. God is not pretending to be someone else or something else by coming to us in Jesus. Rather, the **way** in which God comes to us in the birth of Jesus, reveals to us something of the nature of God. By coming to us in humility, weak and vulnerable, God declares something about God's nature as **Love**, rather than as a guy in the sky who's out to get us if we do not behave ourselves.

More often than not in life there is the Story and then, there is the story that we tell *ourselves* **about** the story.

When it comes to Brexit, for example, we will tell ourselves the story that **we** want to hear. If our economy has a down turn as a result and we voted to leave, we will tell ourselves a story about short term pain for long term gain. If we voted to remain we will tell ourselves a story about disaster. And in 50 years or more we will **still** be contesting the outcome, interpreting the story in different ways depending upon our point of view.

When we come to the story of the Nativity, the story of the birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ, there is also **the story** and then there is the story we tell ourselves about the story. So let's leave behind the romantic images for a moment and remind ourselves of the **actual** story.

Jesus had an umbilical cord, there would have been an afterbirth, just like at any birth, but in filthy conditions. There was an exchange of bodily fluids, the milk that Jesus, drinks is Mary's milk, the same lice and parasites, that undoubtedly infested Mary and Joseph's bodies, undoubtedly went on to infest Jesus' Body.

This is not a story about an **escape** from the depths of humanity. God enters humanity in the person of Jesus up close and dirty and then, Jesus goes on, **always** to be found amidst the chaos of human existence, where ever humanity is most at risk, most disordered, most disfigured and most needy.

There is the story, and then there is the story we tell ourselves **about** the story.

If we want a nice story about the birth of a child, we can have that story. But what the story is ultimately about is our human capacity for **self-delusion**. Our ability as human beings to deny the truth about ourselves.

If Jesus is God Incarnate then we do not judge him, **he judges us**. We view our lives in the light of **his** life.

As people, even very intelligent people, we can throw away our whole lives, our careers, our reputation, our future happiness, because we can't resist temptation, because we think that we can hide, that we can cover up what we've done. We start by deceiving others; but we end up deceiving ourselves.

When I consider **my own regrets** in life and when I consider the regrets that others express to me in my ministry as a priest, most of them are to do with relationships. Regrets concerning not spending enough time with friends and family, opportunities lost for conversations that will now **never happen**. Opportunities lost to support charities or causes, friends in need, that it is now too late to support. Regrets that things got out of hand, for not apologising sooner. That I put my ego first.

My regrets in life **now** and my ultimate regrets will not be that I did not own, consume or buy more stuff, that I did not spend enough time at work, or send more emails. When I consider **my life** in the light of the life of Christ **my regrets** are mostly to do with my **failure** to love others.

So I do not need to be saved from God or the Devil or from anyone else. The person I really need to be saved from **is myself**.

And if, in the light of Christ, what is true for me, is also true for you, then rather than it just being something that is **true** for **us**, What if, it is **just true**.

Because unlike the other stories, where we can delude ourselves and tell ourselves a story that we want to hear **about** the story, **the Gospel story** always has a habit of asserting itself and shining through.

Sometimes, the prophets and great creative spirits have been persecuted by the ecclesiastical institution. Sometimes Christianity has formed itself into a religious association that ignored or fought against other people.

But time and time again the Church's **true** identity in Christ breaks through in countless acts of love and kindness by ordinary Christian men and women who lived faithfully a hidden life and who now rest in unvisited tombs.

So if you have work emails waiting for you that should never have been sent to you in the first place, leave them, until you've finished your holiday. Phone that friend that you've been meaning to speak to but never quite got round to it. If you're being an arse

about something stop being an arse, get over yourself and apologise. Give some time to that cause or charity, spend time with those who you love.

And do all of those things not to get brownie points, or to try and win a life beyond the grave, but just for the good of doing those things, for the good of those things **themselves**. Because, ultimately, they reflect the light of Christ and shine a light in the darkness. And the thing about light is, however small the source, however weak the flame, darkness, can **never** overcome it.

In the birth of Jesus, the light of God has come into our lives to illuminate them, to help us see just how ridiculous we can be, how foolish we would be to depend upon human reason and will alone. During this season of Christmas, we celebrate the light that Christ brings into our lives. In that light we see light clearly and in his service we find our perfect freedom.

That is the story we need to proclaim, a story that is not about getting at anybody else but is concerned with saving us, **from ourselves**.

[This draws on material from Jonathan Sacks, Olivier Clement and George Eliott]