

God loves you. Even more amazingly, God loves me. Christmas means God loves us. God loves every little bit of us, every inch of our skin and every innermost part of our mind and heart.

From the moment you were conceived in your mother's womb, through your birth, your life and your death, God has been loving you and will go on loving you. God has been gazing on delight in you, gazing at you in wonder, God has been holding you in his hand, God has been drawing you into his bosom.

But do I want to be loved? Can I cope with love? Maybe I'd prefer to do my own thing, keep my independence, plough my own furrow.

Being loved means opening ourselves up, taking down our defences, letting somebody else in. It means sharing who I am with somebody else. It means being part of somebody else's plan. It means giving up control.

I am a priest. I'm supposed to be good at this sort of thing. Spending time with God, celebrating his love. Trying to make that love real for others is what I do. But is it real? Have I given up control? Have I allowed this love to be my everything and my all?

What is religion? Is it a way of keeping this love at arm's length or is it a way of really sharing a deep communion?

Mary and Joseph were real human beings with their own problems and issues. As for the shepherds, they were the roughest of the rough. What they all had in common was total openness to God's love. They allowed their lives to be completely taken over.

*"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because she has conceived what is in her by the Holy Spirit."*

*"Let what you have said be done to me."*

*"Today, in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."*

*"Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us."*

When you kneel at the crib, when you come up for Holy Communion, don't just say a prayer, open your heart, know his love deep inside and make your whole being available to him.

*The Word was made flesh and lived among us.* The Word is still made flesh here and now. It is made flesh in hearts that are open to him. Let us pray for one another.

There is anger. There is frustration. There is a sense of being completely overwhelmed by events, by the pressure to get things done, by the pressure to achieve. Then there is the guilt that we are not a bit more religious, the guilt that we don't perhaps enjoy our religion quite as much as we used to. And the institution of the Church can sometimes even seem to get in the way and make things worse.

One of the great privileges and burdens of a catholic priest in the pre-Christmas period is listening to confessions – hearing people's stories, feeling their pain, trying to make sense of things, trying to find God in the messiness of life, trying to discern where the Spirit is leading.

*The Word was made flesh. He lived among us and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.* It is my growing conviction that our religion, our relationship with God has got to change gear. Religion has got to become so much more than just keeping the rules, coming to Mass, saying our prayers and keeping the show on the road.

God has got to be found in the ordinary. *The Word was made flesh.* God, the Word of God, has entered our ordinariness, our messiness. He has felt our anger. He has known our frustration. He is here in the very middle of our lives. Our stories are his stories.

We can't all become great mystics. We can't solve all our problems and become perfect ambassadors of light and peace. But we can begin to open our eyes, to see God in extraordinary places, to see God working through his purposes of love in extraordinary ways.

*All the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God, says Isaiah. All the ends of the earth **have** seen the salvation of our God,* proclaims the psalmist. We have beheld his glory in a manger at Bethlehem, in a young man rebelling against the religious authorities of his time, in a young man whose eyes were so open that God himself shone through them, in a young man who takes all our pain and messiness to the Cross and transforms it into the path of salvation and of joy.

Christianity is not a religion. Christianity is a way of seeing. *Your watchmen raise their voices, they shout for joy together, for they see the Lord face to face, as he returns to Zion.* And yet, the gospel says: *No man has ever seen God* - and certainly not with our physical eyes. *It is the only Son who is nearest to the Father's heart who has made him known.* In Jesus, we can see, face to face, Lover to beloved, heart to heart. Like those watchmen of old we must scale the heights of the Holy City, we must open our eyes, and see the glory of God, *the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.* Open your eyes.