

Midnight Mass 2025 sermon

by Rev. Alan Stewart

If you can't find the words, find the gift



I'm usually a bit cynical, to be honest, about Christmas adverts. They're emotional manipulation deployed by a Capitalist superstructure to manipulate me into spending money. But this year, I was really moved by the John Lewis ad. Cinematically shot, poignantly performed, it struck a note with this late-fifty-something member of the vinyl generation.

If you haven't seen it, it tells the story of a teenage son who gives his dad a copy of the record of the 1990s floor-filler 'Where Love Lives' by Alison Limerick. And, instantly, the music transports the dad back to those carefree days on the dance floor. And, in that moment, a bridge is built between generations through the power of music, resulting in an embrace between father and son.

And then comes the strapline: 'If you can't find the words, find the gift'.

Which in itself is a gift, of course, to a preacher on Christmas Eve; the perfect introduction to that first Christmas all those years ago!

When God couldn't find the words, he sent the gift of the Word; his Son.

And he does it in the most un-godlike, most un-spectacular way possible; through a child born in a borrowed room in a forgotten part of the Roman Empire.

Fast forward to our own capital city, to Trafalgar Square. Among the grand architecture and the public monuments commemorating the great and the good, it would be so easy to miss a sculpture in the portico of the church of St-Martin-in-the-Fields. It's by the artist Mike Chapman and was commissioned for the Millennium. It's called 'In the Beginning'.

Carved from a 4.5-ton block of Portland stone, it depicts a life-size newborn baby emerging from atop a chiseled plinth, umbilical cord still in place, with some of those beautiful words we heard earlier: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'.

Christians believe that the Word, shorthand for Christ, who has been there from the beginning, at one moment in time chose to take human skin and become one of us.

And there is nothing more helpless, more defenseless, than a baby.

If the Christmas story is true, then this says everything about God. The God who created galaxies, is born needing us; hands reaching, lungs screaming, vulnerable as a newborn. He doesn't come with fanfare or muscle or clever arguments.

He comes as one born into poverty and occupation; a Palestinian Jew who would later spend time as a refugee in Egypt. Our God now knows what it's like not only to be one of us, but to be at the bottom of the pile. No privilege, no rights. This is how God chose to dwell among us. This is the true Christ of Christmas.

And this baby asks but one question of us: 'Will you care, not only for me, but for all and especially for those at the bottom of the pile?'

I learnt a new word recently; 'Sonder'. It's the sudden, striking realisation that every person you encounter is just like you, just trying to get by; that each and

every person is living a life just as complex and real as yours, with their own battles and worries and hopes and history.

In Christ, in this Word made flesh, we glimpse a God who sees and sonder each one of us; a God who knows and understands all our battles and worries and hopes and history.

Christmas can at any other time of the year feel overly sentimental. I like to think that it allows us all, for a few short weeks, to suspend our cynicism and dare to believe in something higher and better, and worth believing in.

We may or may not know if we believe in God, but for me, Christmas is God's way of saying without words that he believes in us. After all, he put himself into human hands. Crazy.

Why? Well, like the John Lewis ad, to build a bridge so that each precious son and daughter and child might know the embrace of their heavenly Parent.

If there's something inside you that's saying, 'I wish I could feel that,' or a part of you that wants to look deeper, we're holding a really low-key Exploring Faith course, starting on Thursday nights from 22nd January, which looks at things like: Why are we here? Why pray? Isn't the Bible just a bunch of made-up stories? You'd be more than welcome to try it out.

So, this Christmas Eve, this holy night, I pray that we all might find the gift of that heavenly embrace.