

The fire in the equations

A sermon for Christmas morning, December 25th 2024

Reading [John 1.1-14](#)

When something goes wrong in life you can find yourself becoming an unexpected expert.

A car breaks down. The garage explains the problem and fixes it, and leaves you poorer but wiser, and able to talk impressively about that previously unknown thing, the [differential](#). Or, if sport's your bag, you may be an unwilling authority on injuries to the metatarsal or the [ACL](#) (and if you can tell me afterwards what that stands for, a small festive prize can be yours).

During the pandemic we all got to know about the R number and the Greek alphabet. Alas, we know more than we ever did about place names in Ukraine (most immediately in the [news this morning](#)) and Gaza; and now – more happily, we pray – in Syria.

One reason we humans have made such a good living on this planet (so far) is that we are inquisitive animals: when things go wrong, we are really good at asking how and why. Or sometimes: we cracked the Covid vaccines with stunning speed, but we are less impressive when the problem requires more than a technical fix, whether it is peace on earth or our flickering, unstable climate.

Still, a wonderful story this Christmas of something gone wrong and made right has been the restoration of Notre Dame cathedral in Paris, and one of the best things about it has been that it has enabled the world to look under the bonnet and see how a medieval cathedral works: just

what it takes to support a huge lead roof or a 13-metre stained glass window.

And it's not just when things go wrong that we get inquisitive. We like to take the back off and see how it works, even if 'it' is working perfectly. In a cathedral where I used to work, some visitors' most memorable moments were not in the glorious public space but among the rafters in the roof void, or in the stonemasons' workshop.

All this reminds me of the scene in the film Titanic (before things start to go wrong) when Leo and Kate flit through the ship's engine room, and we glimpse what it takes to propel that vast metal hotel through the ocean: the coal-grimed, sweating crew, the hungry boilers; much more interesting than the brandy swilling and card tables up top.

This morning, like Leo and Kate, we have come to the engine room.

Unlike them, we'll stay a while.

When inquisitive shepherds look into the stable where Jesus is born, they – and now we – are looking into what Rowan Williams, our last archbishop, has called '[the engine room of the universe](#)'. We are looking not at the mechanics, the processes of our world and the cosmos – like the data from the [Parker Solar Probe](#) flying through the sun's atmosphere as I speak – we are looking deeper still, at the origin of it all, at the source of [what Stephen Hawking called](#) the 'fire' in the equations that makes the whole thing work.

Deep down, this is what it takes: this is how God works, how God is. God giving himself away, in a small, fragile, shivering bundle of human flesh, with no grandness, no glory (or rather, it's glory, but not as we know it).

Here we see that the universe owes its existence to a creator who doesn't throw his weight around, who gives space for that very creation to exist, for you and me to be, and to be ourselves.

And (we must add) space for things to go wrong, space for viruses to mutate, space for our own remarkable talents for fighting and persecuting and belittling each other; space for trying to do the right thing yet still getting things wrong (we have seen enough evidence of that in our own Church of England these last days).

That seems to be the space that true freedom requires, and today we see God born into the middle of it, without protection or defence.

It is hard to believe that God really is like this, rather than the incompetent despot that many imagine God to be. It was hard in Jesus' day, too, which was why he needed not just to be born but to grow up, to show in adult word and deed just how it is with God.

The source for the Christmas story we sing in our carols is Luke's gospel – it's there you find the angels and the shepherds, and no room at the inn [[Luke 2.1-20](#)] – and if you believe that God is for life and not just for Christmas and come to St Marylebone again, you will find us following the story of Jesus through that same gospel over the coming year. Sunday by Sunday, Luke will show us how Jesus will persistently give space to those who are pushed around, pushed aside, and will say that the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

Others will find this so intolerable that they will get rid of him, and the life that begins today in a cowshed will end in a criminal's death on a cross. Except that it will not end there, for this fragile life will prove to be indestructible.

This is how God works, by giving away the trappings of strength and significance – as *we* understand them – in case we ever get the idea that the power of God is anything other than the power of love; unstoppable love.

And this morning is where it begins. The shepherds hear voices, angels urging them to Bethlehem, and there they look into the stable at the birth of the source of it all.

And what angel voice has brought you here, I wonder, to this Bethlehem of the heart? You may be one of the believers: you worked out long ago that this is the only place to be on this happy morning. Or, being here may feel almost – accidental. Perhaps the people you're staying with have this odd thing about doing church on Christmas Day and said, 'Why not come along?' And so you have. So have we all.

We gather from a variety of places and circumstances, with all the 'hopes and fears' that the carol '[O little town of Bethlehem](#)' speaks of; and they do indeed all meet here, as we look at this one thing, this revealing in the birth of Jesus of the true face of God.

If something of Jesus can be born in you or in me this Christmas, then so much can be different.

Once you know that, deep down, this is how things are, that the heart of all things beats with the pulse of love; once you and I know we are loved with a love like this, that gives itself away, that is so generous, so resilient, then we can receive strength to live in a world that that can still bully and push around. We can say, in the words of the Psalm writer,

In God I trust and will not fear,
for what can flesh do to me? (Psalm 56.4)

This morning we hear from another of the four gospels, as St John gives his take on the birth of Jesus. He came, says John, and many didn't accept him; but to those who did receive him he gave power to become children of God: that is, to become people who know, deep down, that they belong, that they are embraced, and loved beyond telling.

And now he comes to us. He comes in a variety of ways: for one, in the bread and wine of Holy Communion; for another, in one phrase of a carol, a reading, a prayer; or perhaps it will be in a simple, silent moment that the wondrous gift is given.

However he comes, let us each pray that we may receive him.