



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF CANTERBURY



edral this morning.

Christmas is full of sounds. There are the sounds of parties and gatherings, of familiar people arguing, or joking, or sitting quietly enjoying being together - sounds that bring hope, or joy, or sorrow.

God, in the greatest of sounds, the Word of God, the baby at Bethlehem, calls to the world through a baby's cry: "This is who I am. This is my way of being. This is my language, love."

That word of God has become flesh - tangible, visible, intimate - flesh that changes the world, changes every person who hears and responds.

People will be rejoicing and celebrating, others will be causing trouble and others bringing joy. The world does not stop because it is Christmas. To think so is a dangerous illusion because God came into the reality of the world, to change it, not to give us an escape from it.

God's love, expressed in the word of Jesus, is not a language of sentiment and cheap comfort but a language fit for the reality of a harsh world of oppression, of cruelty, of injustice and suffering. It has a vocabulary for passion, for anger, for protest at injustice and lament. It is the language of the whole of scripture. It is the language lived by Jesus, and it starts in the manger.

Language is the tool through which we decipher and describe the world. God's language of love describes each of us, as we are, not as we pretend, claim, simulate or deceive.

God's language of love changes us as we use it. When we weep over the suffering of a friend, lament the loss of one whom we loved, celebrate new life, discover how much someone loves us, we do so more deeply when we are filled with the love of God, a love expressed in the Word that comes into our lives through this child in the manger, God's language of love.

When great events stir us, or gathering shadows in nation or world wake us in the dark hours, we bring light when we turn to God made flesh and speak the language of God's love.

When suffering overwhelms, and all answers seem vain, God's word is faithful – faithful to those who do not have the strength to hang on to God. This language is spoken even when we cannot receive it.

In this child Jesus, God comes among us physically. God's language of love is a body language: being present as a human amid the joys and terrors of human existence. It is a language that few understood – as we have just heard it read "the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him" (verse 10).

This language of love is why the birth of a baby to poor, unknown parents changes the nature of everything. All babies cause change. Our three-

week-old granddaughter change the lives of her parents, of her brother, of those around, but despite her best efforts she does not change everything that exists.

But this baby, Jesus, unknown, as fragile as little Iris, as needy, as limited by being a human baby – this baby, Jesus, does change everything in creation because He is the Word of God who makes it possible for us to learn the language of God's love.

God's language of love is exclusive. It requires us to forget other languages of hatred, tribalism, rivalry, political advantage and of materialism, pride, greed, and so many more.

God's language of love is not mushy sentiment. In the bible we see the richness of its vocabulary. It encompasses every aspect of living, and every aspect of knowing God. Jesus the adult spoke it perfectly. The baby in the manger lives it flawlessly before He can speak a word, because by His mere existence He is the Word of God to us.

It can be spoken by the generous and wealthy and powerful.

It must be spoken by us on behalf of the persecuted, those farmers in the middle belt of Nigeria who speak God's language of love in protest and lament as they suffer. One thousand and more killed this year alone. It must be spoken by us on behalf of the Christian communities of the middle east and around the world.

And God speaks its words for the poor and suffering and oppressed in every place at every time.

To speak God's love fluently, we must share the heart of God, and we begin to do that through our response to the baby in the manger because in him, unlike us, there is no disconnect between his words and his actions. We over-promise and under-deliver. God under promises in the event of Jesus, a small baby born in a stable, but over delivers in giving salvation to the world.

God's language of love is not just for Christians, or for the comfortable and respectable. Shepherds learned it from angels. Shepherds - awkward, often drunken, frequently violent, seldom religious in the sense the religious leaders wanted. Kings came, foreigners and outsiders, and they learned the language.

I have a friend, also called Justin – Archbishop Vardi of south Sudan, a country where there have been two and a half million refugees since the war started in December 2013. There the Government and opposition groups have been brought together in Christ and a ceasefire is holding.

It is learned by worship, like the Kings and shepherds. It is learned stumblingly, beginning with no more than a doubt filled, questioning opening to God who says to us and to the whole world, through this baby, "here I am". We reply in the same way, knowing almost nothing except we are not fit or ready for Jesus, and we reply, "and here I am too".

To follow Jesus is not through compulsion, for he has expressed God’s language of love by being a baby, so vulnerable and weak, so easily overlooked.

To follow Jesus is not to become dull and tedious, for in him is light and life more than anywhere else in all eternity. The very heavens shake with the music of his birth.

In him is love spoken and reliable.

In Him is a new language that transforms us and all around us, God’s language of love.

5 min read

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