

**Homily** – following the children’s performance of their Nativity play  
A talk by the Rev’d Joanna Coney at St Peter’s Wolvercote on the third  
Sunday in Advent, 16 December 2007

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Follow that!

But we need not to **follow** it just yet – but to take our minds back – back into  
Advent – and back to thinking about John the Baptist

John the Baptist who was sent to prepare the way of God’s Son  
To urge people to ‘get ready’ for the coming of the messiah  
To urge us to prepare ourselves to meet God himself in human form  
To give us courage to speak the truth  
And the truth is that we are to meet God himself, face to face, God who is to  
come among us in human form being – as a vulnerable and dependent baby

It is so easy to lose sight of this amazing truth amongst the hype, the  
commercialism, the sentimentality that in our society surrounds Christmas  
Its so hard sometimes to strip away the dross and actually face the truth of  
what its all about

to try and comprehend the sheer **enormity** of what we are celebrating  
Christ - God himself – coming to us. It is a totally mind blowing and  
staggering event

- The event that changes everything
- That changes history
- That changes the human condition for ever
- That changes our perception of the reason and purpose of life

It isn’t just a delightful story that comes around once a year

God is actually coming among us – here – in 2007 – to meet each and every  
one of us face to face

Perhaps it is all so familiar and so surrounded by traditions and customs –  
good though many of these are in themselves – that we become desensitised  
to the real message – the real reality of what we are celebrating

We get so immersed in the preparations for the celebration – our services  
here at St Peters – the plans to see family and friends - the presents – the  
cards - the food.

All good in themselves – but it becomes all too easy to get so involved in the  
celebrations themselves – the HOW of celebrating that WHAT we are  
celebrating gets a bit lost

The story’s very familiarity maybe blunts its impact

- we may hear the story told in sentimental and saccharine ways – losing  
sight of the pain and fear for Mary and Joseph
- we visualise a cosy gently lit stable – clean and quiet – but the reality  
was more likely a cold dark cave
- we sing O little town of Bethlehem – how still we see the lie

It wasn’t still and peaceful then – and its certainly not now

But – the truth is that God does come into the world

God does take human form  
God does come to meet us where we are

And John the Baptist who we think of particularly today, urges us passionately to prepare for it

But how?

I'd like to suggest that we might find it helpful to our preparation to approach it all from perhaps a less familiar angle

To ask –

Not, what do we find as we gaze in awe and love at that baby in the manger

But what does that baby find in us?

What does God see when he gazes in awe and love at us?

How can we prepare ourselves to be gazed at by God

What will he see?

The faces we put on for other people

The insincerity of some of our dealings

All the defences we build up to avoid facing our real selves

The protective shell we create to hide behind

Maybe, just as we surround Christmas celebrations with hype and festivities customs and traditions and risk losing sight of the central truth of the Christmas Story

So, maybe when God looks at us he sees us surrounded with all sorts of things that obscure the real truth about ourselves

So just as we need to find our way through to the real meaning of Christmas – so we must also find our way through to find the real us

Because

It is the real us that God sees

It is the real us that God loves – warts and all

It is the real us that God greets as he comes to meet us

He is the Truth – and surely we are called to respond in truth

To strip ourselves of the roles we play and to nurture and guard our integrity the real us – to be genuine and honest and not to be ashamed of who we really are

God loves us for who we really are – so why do we feel we have to pretend to be different?

And these are not just questions for this time of year of course

God comes to us – not just at Christmas – but in the common round of daily life and supremely in the Eucharist – and he always comes in truth – and in humility and in purity

May God grant us the grace to respond in the same way  
And to approach him in truth, and in humility and in purity

We pray often here – to prepare ourselves for worship  
'Almighty God  
To whom all hearts are open  
All desires known  
and from whom so secrets are hidden'

May we this advent, this time of preparation, pray this prayer wholeheartedly –  
In sincerity  
in humility  
and in truth

and to strip away and see through the dross and sentimentality that so often  
surrounds the Christmas story  
and to strip away and let God see through the dross and the defences that  
surround us as we prepare to greet – and be greeted by Him

Amen