



ST ANDREW'S CHURCH

SANDFORD-ON-THAMES

Michaelmas (Genesis 28.10-17, John 1.47-end) Teresa Morgan 26th September 2021

One of those stories we find all over the world is that, somewhere in the world, there is a meeting place between earth and heaven. It might be a mountain, or a tree ... but in today's Old Testament lesson, it's a ladder (or staircase) which appears to Jacob in a dream.

Places like this are always special. And when Jacob wakes up, he realizes that the place where he has been sleeping is holy ground. It's the land which the Lord God promised to his grandfather Abraham. And despite the fact that Jacob is not a very impressive grandson of Abraham – at this point, he is on the run after cheating his brother out of his inheritance – in his dream, he heard God say that God would fulfil God's promise by giving him, Jacob, this land.

The land, of course, was, and is, Israel, and for Jacob and his family, living in it is part of being God's people. But in our gospel reading, we heard another descendent of Abraham giving this story a radical twist.

John's gospel is describing how Jesus first met his disciple Nathanael. Nathanael is very impressed because Jesus saw and knew him before they met, but Jesus says, you will see greater things than that. 'You will see the heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.'

John was pretty certainly Jewish, so this is a remarkable thing for him to say.

And it is easy to miss, because, at first sight, it looks as if Jesus is saying, you will see visions of heaven – which is inspiring, but not unusual. But what Jesus actually says is that Jacob's ladder, which used to rest on the holy land of Israel, is now resting on Jesus himself. The relationship between God and his people, which used to rest on the land and the law of the land, now rests on Christ, and it is people's relationship with Christ that defines their relationship with God.

That idea rewrites the story of Israel. God's promise to Abraham is now fulfilled, not when people live and flourish in the land, but when they follow Christ. And everyone who follows Christ, Jewish or gentile, counts as Abraham's family and God's people. (It is no wonder, thinking this, that John's community found themselves at odds with other Jews.)

Well: this rewriting of the story of Israel helped to shape early Christianity. But today, most Christians don't think all that much about the land of Israel, nor about who is descended from Abraham, so for us the story probably has other meanings. And for me, this week, it is a way of saying how blessed Jesus is.

Wherever Jesus is, is the meeting place between heaven and earth, and angels are always descending to bless him and carrying his blessings up from earth to God. And whenever we are with Jesus – in imagination, in spirit, in Israel or in Sandford-on-Thames – then we are also at the meeting place of heaven and earth. And when we are with Christ or following him, then we are as connected to God as one end of a ladder to the other.

John was not the only early Christian to find Jacob's ladder an inspiring image. For some writers, the ladder is not just the connection between Jesus and God: it is Jesus himself, because Jesus bridges the gap

between heaven and earth. For others, the ladder is the Church, because the Church carries us from earth to heaven. For others, the ladder is every person's individual faith.

All these images use the ladder in a way which is very intuitive, but also new. They seem to be thinking, what is a ladder for? Climbing up! And if the angels can climb up it, why not us? If we put our trust in Jesus, if we keep his commandments, then not just the angels, but we will eventually be climbing to heaven! Like in that great gospel song, 'We are climbing Jacob's ladder – brothers, sisters, all over the world.'

So the ladder has stood for different things over the centuries: God's promise of the land of Israel to Abraham; God's new plan of bringing all humanity into God's people through Christ; and human beings' ability, through Christ, to climb up to heaven and be with God.

But today, we are reading it in honour of the feast of St Michael and all angels, so it's also important to celebrate the angels. Angels who, in their endless movement between heaven and earth, express so vividly our sense of how God reaches out to us, every day of our lives. Who bring blessings and guidance, and carry our hopes and fears and prayers back to the ears and heart of God.

The angels come down that ladder as both the messengers and the message of God's love. And they are role models too. They follow God as closely as we are called to follow Christ. They obey God as faithfully as we are called to obey Christ. And God sends them out, as Christ sends us out, to be his hands and feet and voice on earth.

Angels are both an image of God's love for us, and a model of how we can hope to love God. But one of the most beautiful of all visions of angels, is one we find in one of the ancient prayers for the dying.¹ This is a modern version of it:

*May saints and angels lead you on
Escorting you where Christ has gone;
Now he has called you, come to him
Who sits amid the cherubim.*

It is a vision of the soul rising to heaven, as if up a ladder whose every rung is crowded with angels, cheering and singing and praising God, and flocking around the soul as it passes through the pearly gates, to arrive in glory before the throne of God.

Amen

Gospel reading: Mark 5.21-43, and Silver wedding celebration after the 10.0 a.m. service.

Jesus healed people. Made them better. Made them whole, so they could enjoy life as God wants us to enjoy life. And still does. It was often in the gospels people with mental health issues – which in those days they called 'having a demon' which needs driving out – to make room for God in our lives, and find fulfilment in our love for one another, in human flourishing – that's what God our maker and healer and life giver is about. In today's reading it was that poor woman – 12 years ill and the medics couldn't help – and Jairus' 12 year old daughter, so ill they thought she was dead. (I guess she was in a coma). And Jesus brought the breath of God back into both their lives.

¹ <https://www.angels.org.uk/angels-prayers-for-the-dying>

So healers and carers have a special place in Christian prayer and action. It's not only the sick we pray for but those who care for them, and in the past 15 months we've learned to appreciate them even more than (I hope) we did already.

Most of us here today have on the whole (I guess) been quite lucky in our lives – so far. But we all know people who aren't so lucky, and some who are seriously ill. Among them our prayers today are for Julian's friend Catherine and our own Jayne Moore. We pray for God's healing power, that Jesus involves us in, by his Spirit. In that Gospel reading we don't even know the old lady's name – or the name of Jairus' daughter – only her father. Women were less visible in first century Palestine than now. But Jesus didn't distinguish between any of us on grounds of gender – or wealth or class. And still doesn't – we are all equally God's children. Mostly God's grown up children, and if we realize our dependence on God we meet together to thank God for all God's blessings and loving kindness. Not everyone recognises that, so gathering to praise God and be thankful has become rarer in Europe. But millions worldwide *do* gather each Sunday to praise God and receive something invisible in the tokens God gives us in Holy Communion.

This week is a bit special for one family here today – Carol and John and their family, who have joined us as they celebrate their silver wedding. First things first, then the party. A lot has happened in all our lives and in this village and church in 25 or so years. We are all a bit older and maybe some a bit wiser – certainly more knowledgeable about being human after all those years of experience, and we have a lot to be thankful for (and a few things to regret as well as we reflect on the state of the world, including our own country). We could make a list of what's not to like, but we'll take the positives and thank God for them and for each other.

I think we can learn from the old lady in the gospel and from Jairus. They turned to Jesus when they needed help, and they *got* help. All they did was to trust. Turn to God in their trouble and trust God in Jesus to help them, which he did, giving healing and wholeness. Others turn to God and still die – as all of us will, sooner or later. But if we too trust God, and come to know God by knowing Jesus – we will know that, either way, God wants the best for us. God loves us and will never leave us, in life or in death. I don't know what God has in store for any of us, but I do trust God knows best and wants the best for us.

So the message for Carol and John today – and for everyone else who is listening – is the prayer we repeat at funerals, though it is even more appropriate at weddings and anniversaries. It's the prayer for all of us: God give us the wisdom and grace to use aright the time that is left for us here on earth, to turn to Christ and follow in his steps in the way that leads to life in all its fullness. I guess most of us here today have tried to do that in our faltering ways – stumbling occasionally but picking ourselves up, or being picked up, and continuing on our life's journey – thankful for all we have to be thankful for, accepting what can't be changed, trusting that God knows best and loves us and wants the best for us all, and wanting us to recognize that invisible source and goal of life because that way we'll be helped in the months or years that lie ahead.

God bless us all. Amen.

27th June 2021

John 15.9-17 Easter 7 16th May 2021 Rev. Teresa Morgan

'When Did you Last See the Son?'

Last Thursday was Ascension Day, which means we've come to the end of our annual journey following the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, which began last Advent Sunday. On Advent Sunday I'm often struck by the different places in which the gospels begin this story: Mark at Jesus' baptism, when he

receives the Holy Spirit, Matthew and Luke at his conception, when his mother receives the Spirit, and John before the beginning of creation.

This week it struck me how differently the gospels end (and we've heard all four endings since Easter). Do you remember that Victorian painting about the English Civil War, called 'When Did you Last See Your Father'? This sermon could be called, 'When did you last see the Son?'

It is a sobering thought that, in Mark's gospel, the last time we are told that most of his followers saw Jesus, was in that short, ugly struggle in the dark, in Gethsemane, when Jesus was betrayed and arrested. Except that Peter follows at a distance to the High Priest's house, and some of the women follow at a distance all the way to Golgotha.

There are no resurrection appearances in Mark's gospel, but he does give us one thing. The young man whom the women meet at the tomb, gives them a promise. Go home, he says. Go back to Galilee, and you'll see him there.

In today's gospel reading, Matthew fleshes that promise out. Matthew has two resurrection appearances: one on Easter Day, and one later. The disciples do go back to Galilee, and there, Jesus meets them – and gives them a job to do and another promise. 'Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them to do everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you, to the end of time.'

John goes further again. His Jesus appears three times to different people. But interestingly, John ends with the story of doubting Thomas, to whom Jesus says, 'Have you come to trust because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have trusted'. Jesus has appeared to the disciples, but, he says, he shouldn't need to – it's enough to have faith.

And Luke goes furthest of all, saying that Jesus not only appears and proves his identity to the disciples, but they even see him being taken up into heaven.

One thing that is certain is that the gospels didn't invent the tradition of the resurrection appearances. At least twenty years before the earliest gospel, Paul tells the Corinthians that the risen Christ appeared several times to the disciples and also to himself. What's interesting is what the gospels do with the tradition.

Mark seems to be telling us: go home. You've been on a rollercoaster journey with Jesus. Go back to your roots. See your family. Rest for a while. Wait. At some point, God will give you a new beginning.

For Matthew, it's important that the new beginning is also new work: a new way for the disciples to serve God, and with it, a new responsibility to serve other people.

For Luke, it's important that the disciples understand what has happened and feel reassured. Luke's is the gospel in which the risen Christ explains why the Messiah had to suffer and die, and blesses his followers. He also gives them a new job to do, as witnesses to everything that has happened. But Luke's Jesus knows that going on following him is not going to be easy, so he promises them the power of the spirit to help them.

John is the one who recognizes that, although the disciples saw the risen Christ, many, many future followers of Jesus will never see him. And he speaks directly to us, saying, that doesn't matter. When you have heard everything that happened – and when you have turned your life to following Jesus, following his example, keeping his teachings, loving God and each other as Jesus loved you – then you are doing, and being, everything that God could hope for, and you already have one foot in eternal life.

This year, we have not only followed Jesus on the rollercoaster of his life and death and resurrection; we have also been on the rollercoaster of covid. And, like the disciples', our following of Jesus has been disrupted: by illness, lockdowns, closed churches, fear of infection, self-isolation. If Christians asked each other today, 'When did you last see the Son?' – at least in worship – in the bread and wine of the Eucharist – in the gathered congregation of the faithful – we would have as many different answers between us as the gospels.

But, as we come to the end (we hope) of months of lockdown, and hope that a new stage of life is beginning, and as we pause in these quiet ten days between Ascension Day and Pentecost, the endings of all four gospels have something to say to us.

Go home, they say. See your family. Let yourself rest for a while. And wait, because God will find a new beginning and new life for us. Maybe we will find a new role and new work for Christ. And we may never see the risen Christ, as the disciples did, but that doesn't matter at all. When we have heard everything that happened, and turned our lives to following Jesus, following his example, keeping his teachings, loving God and each other as Jesus loved us, then we are doing and being everything that God could hope for.

The weeks and months to come may not be easy. But the Spirit of God will be with us, working in us. And Christ himself will be with us always, to the end of time. Amen

John 15.9-17 Easter 6 9th May 2021 Rev. Teresa Morgan

Our gospel this morning is one we normally hear on Remembrance Sunday, when we are always moved by the words, 'No-one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.' But today, it's another side of the reading that strikes me: its vision of God as the master, who says, through Jesus, 'If you love me, keep my commandments ... You are my friends if you do what I command you...' 'I no longer call you slaves,' Jesus says. We might wonder, were we *slaves*? *Are* we slaves?

It's a worrying question because, for most of us nowadays, slavery and love are a worrying combination. If one side in a relationship has all the power, then it's not truly love. And the idea that God is both loving and all-powerful raises some famously difficult questions. Why doesn't such a God stop bad things happening to good people? Why would he let people make bad choices and then punish them?

Just as worryingly, in John's gospel, love and power combine in an image of God as the Father who has total power over his family. As Jesus says earlier, 'The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing.' (5.19) That model of family was quite normal in John's world, but it's much more problematic in ours.

But we do generally believe in families. And our own idea of family love may help us to negotiate with John's.

For us, I think, it's normal to think of love in a family as something that grows and changes as we grow. When we're babies, we depend completely on our parents, and they are in charge. But, gradually, we learn to be independent. We develop a sense of our individuality. A friend of mine once said to me, 'I've just decided that I'm not a hobbies person.' Her mother was a big hobbies person, but in her 30s, my friend just realized it wasn't her, and she said, 'It's such a relief. I threw out all my sewing!' (It sounds silly, but it's not always easy to be yourself!)

Later still, we learn to see our parents not just as the power we grow out of to become ourselves, but as people like ourselves. Who are on their own journey, still growing and changing. And if we're lucky, we come to love them not just as parents but as people, and recognize how much we have in common. We are part of each other's lives. We depend on each other. Our lives mean more together than apart.

So love takes us from dependence, through independence, to interdependence. And that might remind us of another way of thinking about ourselves and God, which is also part of our tradition.

It begins with a rumour, which runs among us in every generation, saying, surely there's more to life than meets the eye... Behind and throughout the world something is moving – a spirit, a power? – which holds everything together, and gives it meaning. It tantalizes us with the feeling that, just beyond our sight, the world makes sense – and the sense it makes is good.

Once we've heard that rumour, we never really escape it. As the psalmist says, 'If I ascend to heaven you are there; if I make my bed in Hell, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there shall your hand lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.' (139.8-10)

For many of us, that rumour is the beginning of our sense of God, and it tells us that God is everywhere, around us and in us; we're part of God, and God is part of us. Which also means that we are part of each other – like the parts of a body, which make more sense in relation to each other than they could ever make on their own – and the sense we make is part of the meaning of the whole.

In that vision, we belong to God, not as slaves, or even children, but as part of the expression of Godself which is the whole of creation. And that vision, like our sense of family, takes us beyond dependence on God, beyond independence from God, to interdependence with God.

Something like that interdependence is, I think, what John's Jesus is talking about, when he says, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' It's the love that says, we are one creation, one body. Our lives have more meaning together than they will ever have apart. And if we forget that, then we tear ourselves apart.

That's not to say that recognizing our interdependence, and practising love, are always easy. Everyone who's been part of a family knows that. We can probably all think of people, frankly, we'd rather not be interdependent with. And, in our very imperfect world, sometimes practising love bears fruit – fruit that lasts, as Jesus says, and changes the world – and sometimes it doesn't seem to change anything much.

To choose to love anyway is a leap of faith: the fundamental leap of faith, which says, if God is God, then we are all part of God, and accepting that is the only way to be fully human.

For me, this is a way of thinking about John's imagery of God as all-powerful parent, which gets us away from the outdated first-century model of the family. It's no less demanding than the idea of being God's slave or obedient child. But it's also worth bearing in mind, that John didn't think that being part of God's family takes anything away from that hard-won individuality that we value so much in the modern world. When we look at any person of great faith – think of Martin Luther King, or St. Teresa of Calcutta – it's obvious that they don't lack individuality. What they lack is a sense that who and what they are is separable from God and God's creation.

Whoever we are, God's spirit blows through the shape of us. It doesn't blow us away: it makes us more full of life. As John said of Jesus himself, 'In him was life, and the life was the light of humankind, and the light shone in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.' Amen

Mark 8.31-8 Second Sunday of Lent: 28th February 2021 Rev. Teresa Morgan

I have to admit that when I turned to today's gospel, a couple of days ago, and read, *If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me*, my first thought was, 'Oh, don't we have enough problems this year?' I felt a bit like St. Teresa of Avila, who, in a time of suffering, complained bitterly to God. God said, 'But this is how I treat all my friends!' and Teresa retorted, 'Then no wonder you have so few of them!'

But somehow just thinking that made me hear Jesus' saying again. Not as 'take up your cross,' but as 'take up your cross.' Whatever it is that you are already bearing—really take it up, and walk with it.

This was of reading what Jesus says seems to fit quite well into Lent. Last week, we heard how Jesus was tempted by Satan in the desert. And we all know, from our own experience, what Jesus also knew, that the real temptations in this life are not things we go out into the desert to look for, in a spirit of heroism. The real temptations are the weaselly little things that are already in our lives, like selfishness and lack of compassion and a taste for power, and Lent is the time when we are challenged to face those things and really grapple with them.

In a similar way, we all already have crosses to bear. Maybe we're not well, or not happy, or in a job that doesn't nurture us. Maybe somebody close to us is making our life difficult—or we're making our own life difficult by being angry, envious, or unkind.

In ordinary times, many of us spend quite a bit of time and energy avoiding facing these burdens. Keeping busy to distract ourselves. Grumbling to let off steam, without changing anything. Self-medicating with chocolate or Netflix, or ... pick your preferred narcotic. But in Lent, Jesus invites us to take a hard look at the things that burden us, and then to take them up, and follow him. Not in a spirit of masochism, but because, as Jesus also knew in the desert, you have to face the evils of this world to know them and not to be ruled by them. And it's only by really facing our crosses and taking them up that we can hope eventually to put them down and save our life.

Taking up our crosses, in this sense, is a very varied exercise, because the things that burden us are very varied, and in general, the evils of the world are very varied.

Maybe our cross is physical suffering, and we're being called to reflect more deeply on our own fragility, and the fragility of everybody—and with that, the incredible power of spirit that runs through us and lightens our lives in spite of our own limitations. Maybe our cross is some aspect of our circumstances, and we are being called to reflect on what we could do to change them—for ourselves, and perhaps for other people too. There are as many crosses as there are things wrong with the world, and as many ways of taking them up as there are ways of working to make the world better.

So this Lent, I encourage you to look at the crosses you are bearing—and there may well be more than one—and pick just one, and really take it up. Look at it; think about it; think about what it is showing you about yourself and the world.

And think about what it would take to make this cross what the physical cross was for Jesus Christ: not, in the end, a burden that led to death, but a power that redeemed the world and brought it to eternal life.

Because the promise of the gospel is that if we follow Christ, then the way of the cross is only one stage on a much longer road, that ends not on Golgotha, but in the glorious life of the kingdom of heaven.

Prologue of John's Gospel 7th February 2021 Rev. Teresa Morgan

The Prologue of John is one of the clearest expressions of one of the most mysterious ideas in the New Testament: the pre-existence of Christ, before he was 'made flesh' as a human being.

It's not a topic we think about very often in church, and when we do, many people find it difficult. The idea that Jesus of Nazareth, who lived and died, was a man of God, a man from God, and even God with us, is a cornerstone of our faith. The idea that God raised Jesus from the dead and received him into heaven is harder for some to believe – but the sense that Christ is with God, and still with us, and that we

are in his hands and in his care until the end of the age, is something most Christians live with, in faith, every day.

But, we may wonder, why would we believe that Christ existed before he was born, and took part in creation? To many people, it just doesn't seem necessary.

It may help to bear in mind that, in the world of the first century, people thought of two main types of heavenly being. There were gods and other divinities who at some point visited earth: perhaps to test people's piety, deliver a message, or help them. And there were exceptional human beings who were taken up to heaven after they died, like Abraham, Hercules, or the Roman emperors.

It also helps to remember that when the apostles began preaching, the Christ that they called people to put their faith in was, first of all, the risen Christ, in heaven.

So early preachers had two possible ways of thinking about Christ. Some saw him as a man of God who was taken up to heaven. But there was a difficulty: human beings who were taken up to heaven were not usually envisaged as taking a very high place there. They became demi-gods, or angels, or simply great souls. For his followers, Jesus Christ was much more than that. He was the presence of God with humanity, and humanity with God. He made it possible for imperfect humanity to be reconciled with God, and eventually for all his followers to follow him to heaven. To be as great a heavenly figure as Christians recognized Christ as being, some people thought he must have been with God – been God – from the beginning. And so the idea of pre-existence developed.

People described the pre-existent Christ in various ways. For some, he was God's Word – God's speech-act, which brought the world to life, just as Jesus Christ later brought humanity to new life. Or he was the Wisdom of God, that reaches out to teach human beings how to be as God created and longs for them to be. Or he was the light that enlightens everyone.

Well, you may be thinking, this is all very well, but does it matter to us? I think it does.

Christians have always understood that Christ is not only the Saviour and Lord of his people, but also brings all of us with him, to heaven, to share his glory. And in Jesus's own day – and still today – that is a rare idea. In many ancient traditions, there are great individuals who go up to heaven (or somewhere similar), but they don't take everyone with them. What makes Jesus unique, paradoxically, is that he represents and embodies us all. As a human being, he makes it possible for us to be like him, and, as God, he brings us all to be with him.

Epiphanytide 24th January 2021 Rev. Teresa Morgan

I've been thinking a lot this week about the sadness of closing churches. Churches are places of so much nurture and nourishment. They feed our hearts and minds – and eyes and ears. They teach and inspire us to care for one another. They hold our prayers, and we entrust our hopes and fears to them. When we come into a church, we come to a place where we know we are known, loved, and valued. In church we can dare to be our best selves. Those are rare and precious things.

And churches remember. They remember our friends and neighbours who are no longer with us. They link us to Christians before us, right back to Jesus' disciples.

But that reminds me that very early Christians didn't have any buildings of their own. Right up to the fourth century, if they did build a church, it was liable to be looted or destroyed. They must have felt their lack of holy places, when there were temples and synagogues all around them, but they made a virtue of it.

St Paul says to the Corinthians, 'Do you not know that you are the temple of God, and the spirit of God lives in you?' (1 Cor. 3.16). In the second century, Clement of Alexandria says, 'Christ builds his temple in people, so that he can establish the home of God in humanity'. And for Origen of Alexandria, anywhere Christians meet becomes not only a holy place, but a place where the saints and angels gather overhead and join in their worship.

We may yet have to close Sandford church, but if we do, it will still be here, holding our prayers and waiting for us. And we can take encouragement from early Christians, who knew that, wherever they were and wherever they worshipped, God was with them, and, in them, God was in the world. And whenever they said their prayers, angels and saints gathered overhead and worshipped with them.

We can also reflect that if, like Paul's Corinthians, we are God's temple, then all the holiness that lives in a church also lives in us, as we go about our daily lives. We make the holiness of holy places portable, and, if we are faithful, then the people we meet – in person or via technology – may even meet God in us.

That does not seem a bad aspiration for the Epiphany season, the season of showing Christ to the world.

Holy Innocents' Day 2020 Rev. Teresa Morgan

I hope you are having a very happy week, with plenty of celebration – as well, probably, as some frustration and worry. It's Christmas 2020-style....

And part of Christmas, is that tomorrow is the Feast of the Holy Innocents, which nearly always falls on a day when most of us aren't in church, and which tends to get a bit overlooked, in the middle of the festive season.

Even Matthew's gospel doesn't make much of it. The story of King Herod killing all the male children around Bethlehem two years old and under, to try to get rid of the newborn King of the Jews – it's three verses, tucked in between the much more famous stories of the Coming of the Magi and the Flight into Egypt.

And there is something bitterly appropriate about that. In every crisis in history – every war, every moment of change – children are always the most vulnerable, and when they suffer, it is always under-reported.

But this year is one to remember the Holy Innocents. Because there have been many tragic stories of the suffering brought by the pandemic, but nothing has been more shocking than the reports of how child abuse has increased – physical, emotional, sexual abuse; murder. Stressed parents and carers, volatile and violent people locked down together, disruption in social services, children out of school, people spending hours a day online – they've all contributed. And this terrible story has hardly ever hit the headlines.

And that, among much else, raises a question about Matthew. Because we usually assume that the only good thing about this story is that, historically, it probably didn't happen. We think this partly because we know a lot about King Herod, but there is no other record of this massacre, and partly because we think that Matthew created the whole of this birth narrative to show how Jesus is part of the whole history of Israel.

The story of the Innocents looks back to the destruction of Jerusalem in war in the 6th century BC, and before that, to the Book of Exodus, where the Egyptian Pharaoh tried to kill all the male children of the Israelites, because he thought they were doing too well in his country. But the mother of Moses hid her son in a basket in the reeds on the edge of the Nile, where he was found and brought up by the Pharaoh's daughter. Echoing that story is one way in which Matthew says that Jesus is going to be like Moses, but even greater.

The story also pre-echoes some of Jesus's prophecies, as an adult. 'I have come not to bring peace, but a sword' (Mt. 10.34). And, before salvation comes, 'you will hear of wars and rumours of wars ... there will be famines and earthquakes ... woe to pregnant women and nursing mothers in those days' (24.6, 19).

Matthew knows well what we have been reminded of, this year: that in times of crisis, children are always among the most vulnerable.

But in light of our experience this year, I think we should pause, and consider the possibility that the story of the Holy Innocents is not just a way of saying that Jesus is greater than Moses, and not just a pre-

echo of Jesus' prophecies of the end time. Because we do know enough about Herod to know he was more than capable of doing something like this. He saw threats to his power everywhere, and he ordered the murder of scores, if not hundreds of people, including one of his wives, three of his sons, and forty-five members of the religious council in Jerusalem.

So Matthew's story may not have happened when and where he describes, but it is not unbelievable that it happened somewhere, at some point, when Herod saw some threat to his power. And if it did, nothing is more likely than that historians didn't record it, because the suffering of children hardly ever hits the headlines.

So I would like to suggest, this Christmas, after the year we have had, and bearing in mind that the next few months may also be very difficult, that we take this story of the Holy Innocents especially to heart.

And three thoughts emerge from it, for me.

One, is that, even though this is a tragedy, there is also ray of hope in it – and in the Exodus story that it looks back to. Because in each story, one child was saved by the courage and resourcefulness of his parents. That reminds us that – although there are children in our country whose lives are horribly vulnerable – there are also many whose lives are saved and made safer by the courage and resourcefulness of their parents, grandparents, foster parents, teachers, or social workers. So this day is also a day to remember and honour all of them.

And it's also a day for the rest of us, who don't have direct responsibility for vulnerable children, to think about whether we can do more to support the people who do. Whether personally, or through local initiatives like foodbanks, or by holding to account the services that work with children and the politicians who fund their work.

Last, but not least, when we are thinking about our charitable giving – as individuals or as a church – this year might be a really good year to support some children's charities.

Because Jesus Christ was a baby, and a child, in a world in crisis. And if people had not saved him, he wouldn't have grown up to save his people. And when you get right down to it, that's really why Matthew tells this story.

He understands that the God who calls us, in Christ, is calling us not just to put our trust in God and be saved, but to join with God in saving ourselves by saving each other. Because, Matthew understands, it is in giving that we receive; and in forgiving that we find ourselves forgiven; and it is in giving life to others that we become part of eternal life.

Christmas Day 2020 Rev. Teresa Morgan

Well, we made it! We have sent cards and wrapped presents and decorated and shopped and cooked – and we've made it to Christmas Day. Possibly a bit tired – but I hope happy. Though most of us are also probably a bit worried, or sad about family and friends we can't spend Christmas with. And most of us are looking back at a difficult year, and some of us have lost people we loved.

So, many of us greet Christmas morning, this year, with slightly mixed feelings. But however we feel, and whatever else is going on – we are here. And we have many reasons for being here: faith; hope; tradition; community. Christmas carols! But one reason I am certain we all share: the feeling that we are welcome here, in this house of God.

We welcome each other, and framing and empowering our welcome, is a much bigger one. Which says to every one of us, however you are feeling, and whatever is going on in your life, you are at home here. Here you are known, inside and out, and loved, and treasured. By your neighbours, and, above all, by God and Jesus Christ.

Because one way to describe what we celebrate today is to say that God so loved the world that he sent his Son to make it home. To make this world, which for Adam and Eve and their descendants was a place of exile, of hard graft and a steep learning curve, into the place where God and humanity are reunited: where, as the Book of Revelation says, God makes his home with his people, and we are at home with God.

It's pure gift.

And it's the irony of the season, that we prepare for it for weeks, and when it comes, we're so busy giving and receiving our own presents we're rarely completely ready to receive God's.

But, as it happens, I don't think that matters too much. For one thing, all the gifts we give and receive are Christmas are practice – practice in love, and practice in grace – *charis* – that beautiful word in Greek which means both generosity and gratitude. We are all practising grace on one another!

And, anyway, I'm not sure we could ever be completely ready for a gift from God. Any more than new parents like Mary and Joseph can be completely ready for their first child. Love, and grace, and bringing up a baby, are three things we grow into as we practise them.

And we can and do practise them, and hope to get better at them, not least because the grace of God in Christ is the one present we get every year that we don't open.

This is the present that opens us.

Because the Word of God, as John calls him, who comes into the world, full of grace and truth, is the Jesus who will grow up to say, Don't be afraid.

Come to me, when you are tired and burdened, with all the damage you've received, and the damage you've done, and put it all down here.

Come to me, and let yourself be known, inside and out, and treasured, and loved.

And in the warmth of that love, let your heart open like a flower, and feel yourself growing and flourishing.

Because, as John's gospel says, Jesus Christ came that you should have life, and have it more abundantly – life in you, and working with you, until your heart and mind and arms are as wide open as God's and Christ's own, and wherever you are in your own life, you know you are also, always, at home in the house of God.

A very happy Christmas to you. Amen