
Four Mysteries and a Truth

Luke 2.1-20

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 24 2005 by the Revd Canon Dr Sam Wells

Tonight is a night of great wonder. It is a night when a new baby is wrapped in swaddling clothes and when our Christian faith is shrouded in mystery. We come here tonight, like the shepherds, like the magi, to worship the new born king, to find in him the truth about the world, the truth about ourselves, the truth about God. But to get to this truth, to experience this truth, we need first to appreciate the mystery, the fourfold mystery of God's heavenly drama. Tonight we rediscover Christmas, the cosmic thriller of four mysteries and a truth.

The first mystery is this. Why did God bother to create the universe? Think of it. A hundred million stars in every galaxy, a hundred million galaxies in the universe. Why? Why this astonishing, colossal project which defies description or comprehension? And why did he create life on this planet, tucked away in an obscure corner of that vast universe? Why did he bother? Surely there must have been more pressing projects for him to take on. Surely he must have wondered if he would regret it. What an overwhelming universe it is. And here, in a little corner of it, Earth, seas, land, mountains, reptiles, insects, plants, animals – and human beings, you and me. And that is the first mystery: why did he bother?

And the second mystery is like unto it, thus. Why, given the mess we made of things, did God continue to bother? Why did he not give up on us when humans turned out the way they did? The Old Testament is a passionate story of love and hate, delirious joy and crushing disappointment. For reasons that are a mystery, God sent a rainbow to Noah and promised that he would never destroy the earth again. But why he made that promise, and whether he regretted it, who can say? Why did he continue to bother? I expect like me you've spent the last fortnight opening cards from old friends, with a lengthy typed letter inside that says how young Freddie is now a neurosurgeon, Daisy has just won the Nobel Prize for astrophysics, but Sally ... Sally, sadly, is still... well, who knows what 2003 will bring? Imagine God's Christmas letter. Venus has grown up a lovely girl, Mars is a real sweetie, Mercury has his ups and downs, but Earth..., Earth still seems unable to help herself and struggles with the simplest practices of peace – but, well, who knows what 2003 will bring? Fancy writing the same letter for thousands of years. That's the second mystery. The first mystery is why does he bother, the second is why does he continue to bother.

The third mystery seems to be the greatest mystery of all. It is the most baffling part of the whole story. Given that God bothered to make the universe and the world within it, given that God continued to bother with the world despite the way things turned out, the unfathomable mystery is this: why do we not bother – why can we not be bothered? I don't know if even God has the answer to this one. It defies all logic. We have been given this whole world, a playground of delight. We have been given time and space to grow and learn and experiment and discover. We have been given taste to relish, sight to dazzle, touch to treasure, hearing to enthral. We have been given beauty beyond value, music of the heavens, hearts to love and minds to ponder. Most of all we have been given a story that makes sense of the whole mystery, an invitation that shows us where we fit in to this great cosmic drama, a promise of companionship with God and a place at his table forever. And yet we can't be bothered. We leave half the Christmas gifts unopened and go and sulk in our bedroom. And if someone asks us what the matter is we are baffled to find an answer. We can't be bothered, can't be bothered to join the dance of God's glory, can't be bothered to enter the garden of his delights, find no reason to explore the palace of his unending peace. What a startling mystery: why do we not bother?

And it is in the context of these three mysteries that we approach tonight's mystery, the mystery of Christmas. Given that God had bothered to make the universe and place us in it, given that he had continued to bother over it, given that we couldn't be bothered with him, why tonight, why at backward Bethlehem, why to a child-mother in an obscure cattle-shed – why, when God chose to come himself, when he could be bothered that much that he set aside all the trappings of majesty – why did he come with so little bother? Why was he wrapped in humble rags, not robes of gold, why was he laid in a dirty feeding trough, not a jewel-encrusted four-poster bed? Why didn't he trumpet the whole world and make them notice, make them be bothered? Why

didn't he broadcast to the whole universe that the saviour of the world was coming to town? Why did he come as a baby at all, and not a mighty warrior for justice and truth? Where was the anger, where was the fury, where was the righteous resentment that his people had rejected his openhearted love, ignored his bountiful promises, scorned his kingdom of peace? This is the fourth mystery – why did he come with such little bother?

Four mysteries that go together to make up the drama of Christmas. But I promised you that I would not just show you a great mystery, I would show you perhaps an even greater truth. The truth is simply put. He did bother. And, just as significantly, he still does. And the key to the way he did it lies in one detail that is so important to Luke's story that he repeats it in case we didn't catch it the first time. We are so familiar with the Christmas story – the story of the little donkey, the dusty road, the starry night, the cattle lowing, the series of Bethlehem hotels bursting with travellers, the tired innkeeper, the bed of straw. None of these staple nativity ingredients are in the Bible, of course. So what is in the Bible – what does Luke regard as crucial to the story of Jesus' birth? 'She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger'. Luke tells us twice.

Swaddling clothes. Bands of cloth. Very, very ordinary. In fact so ordinary that it's hard to see why Luke tells us once, let alone twice. Aren't all babies wrapped in bands of cloth after they are born? It's easier to understand the detail about the manger. Jesus was born in very humble circumstances – homeless, almost out of doors, in the cold – and his first worshippers were social outcasts, shepherds, the socially and ritually excluded of their day. That's what the manger tells us. But bands of cloth? What is strange about that? Well, nothing, except it makes a point that Luke comes back to at the end of his gospel. At the two defining moments in Jesus' life, his birth and his death, he is utterly powerless – so powerless that he cannot use his arms. Here at his birth, his arms are strapped to his sides by swaddling clothes – Luke tells us this twice remember, and the angels tell the shepherds that this will be the 'sign'. And later at Jesus' death his two hands are nailed to either end of a horizontal beam, and as he dies in agony he cannot even wipe his own brow or scratch an itch or waft away a fly or mosquito. These are the most intimate moments in Jesus' life, and at both moments, by nails and by swaddling clothes, he is, literally, disarmed.

This is the astonishing truth of Christmas. Jesus is God disarmed. The disarmed and disarming love of God. And this is the closest God gets to revealing to us the secret of the four great mysteries. The first mystery, you'll remember, is 'why did he bother?' – why did God bother to create the universe. The answer must be, he bothered to make the universe because he looked forward to this moment, this breathtakingly beautiful moment when earth and heaven were joined in perfect harmony, when there was a new creation, fully human and fully God, the unchanging wonder of God in one flesh with the transient being of humankind. The possibility of friendship, of God and his people as true companions, embodied in the life of a single being. Jesus is the reason for the universe, and Jesus is the meaning of the universe. This tiny baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes and just alive – he is the meaning of life, the universe and everything. That's why God bothered to create the universe – because he wanted to be our friend in Jesus.

And the second mystery, you'll remember, is 'why did he continue to bother?' – why, given the way the world turned out, did he not just give it up as a bad job. The answer to this mystery must be, there is a difference between something being happy and something being beautiful. The story is told of a concert pianist who was on the point of beginning a performance when there was a scream from the audience. A child had left her seat beside her parent and was running around the auditorium. The concert pianist stepped away from his instrument in order to maintain concentration. The child ran up the steps onto the stage, sat herself down on the stool and began to play discordant notes at random as she pleased. The hushed audience gasped in horror and embarrassment. The pianist walked towards the child and stood behind her as she played. The pianist leant over her and, without disturbing her, placed right and left hands outside her two small hands on the keyboard. The pianist then began to play, in response to her notes, weaving their discordant sounds into an improvised melody. The audience's wonder at the beauty of this moment resembles our amazement when we realise that God transformed the horror of our sinfulness into the glory of his incarnation. He made the world to be happy, but when it turned nasty, he made it beautiful instead. He continued to bother, because his glory could be revealed not just in wondrous creation, but even more in transforming love. And that newborn child in swaddling clothes shows us both creation and transformation.

Now the final mystery, 'why did he come in this way?', why did he come with so little bother, comes into view. We spend all our Christian life learning and trying to be God's child, and here he turns all our efforts upside down, because on this night, born of Mary, he is our child. He is not the loving parent, he is the needy child. Of all the extraordinary ways Mary's prophetic song comes true, this is surely the most vivid. God puts down the mighty from their seat and exalts the humble and meek. He comes down from the mighty seat of being our loving father and becomes our child, and meanwhile exalts us, his meek children, and makes us, in Mary, his parent. Did ever a revolution in history compare to this? Can we comprehend what we are seeing? Almighty God become a tiny baby. He who made the starry height is set upon our arms tonight. We spend all our Christian life praying to Almighty God, and here is God, face to face with us for the first time, and he is wrapped in swaddling clothes, unable to move a finger. We read in the Old Testament constantly of God's outstretched hand and his mighty arm, but here he is, wrapped in bands of cloth – if you'll forgive the pun, armless. Nothing can ever be the same again – childhood, parenthood, faith, reality. Jesus is God disarmed. The disarming love of God.

But, you'll say, you can't stop there – you've missed a mystery out. The third, perhaps the most unfathomable mystery of all. Why, if God bothered, and continued to bother, and came to reveal and revolutionise reality yet with so little bother – why, why oh why, can we not be bothered? Why do we so perversely turn away from the limitless wonder and glory of God? Why do we spurn his constant invitation of undying love and constant friendship? I am not going to answer that one for you. You can only answer that for yourself. But once again the swaddling clothes give us the clue to God's response. God in no way forces us to love him. He wants our hearts. So he comes to us, tiny, naked, artless, needy, and wrapped in bands of cloth to show there is no catch, no hidden trick, no clever device to ensnare or entrap us. Do we not find the innocence of this love disarming? Is it not time, tonight, to put down our weapons of defence against God, our pointless war against goodness, truth and beauty, and be disarmed by this swaddled bundle of joy and gladness? God is with us, and he is with us in a tiny, defenceless baby being held out by a poor, overwhelmed young mother. She is holding him out to you. This is God, for you, disarmed. Take him, hold him, embrace him. How can we refuse him?