

Sermon – Midnight Communion – 24th December 2019

I wonder what you made of the John Lewis Christmas advert this year. I'm sure at this stage I should say that other department stores are available, though now must surely be too late for even the most last minute of Christmas shoppers.

In case you haven't seen it, this year's advert features the rather adorable Edgar, a young dragon who is so excited about Christmas that he can't quite control the flames that come out of his nose and mouth. As he frolics round the village, he ruins the children's fun by melting their snowman and the frozen pond on which they are skating, before burning down the village Christmas tree. It's safe to say that for all his cuteness, his popularity is waning fast, so he retreats to his home.

Luckily, though, faithful friend Ava, distressed that his excitement is having such a detrimental effect, and determined to restore his reputation, buys him a Christmas pudding as a gift. When he then joins the village festivities, fear turns to joy as Edgar focuses his excited flames on the pudding, lighting it up for everyone to enjoy.

For John Lewis, the message of the advert is "show them how much you care", and if we really do take it at face value, remembering that showing someone that we care has got nothing to do with how much money we spend on them, it's quite a good message for Christmas. Ava is Edgar's best friend, and because she cares for him, she sees all that he *is*. She knows he isn't perfect – none of us are – but she knows that there is more to him than the fear and upset generated by the unfortunate consequences of his fiery outbursts. And so she tries to find a way for people to see his best qualities. To see his gifts. To see beyond those things which might initially put them off. And of course everyone gains something from this, because we all need to be challenged to look beyond our first impressions and to value one another for all that we are – and indeed to be valued.

At Christmas, when we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we are confronted with the deep truth that God wants to be with us. That God wants to be with us so much that God becomes like us. Is born as a baby to human parents. And lives a life alongside us.

In a humorous, festive way, Edgar and Ava show us just a little of what it looks like to live alongside one another. To show love. To look beyond our own assumptions and prejudices. To see the gift that we are to one another. To allow others to touch our lives and change us.

The story of Jesus, quite inevitably, goes so much deeper. Let's pause for just a moment to look at the crib scene. There we find a young woman who has just given birth to a baby. A young woman whose reputation could have been destroyed by the revelation that she was expecting a child before being married, yet she still said "yes" to God. A young woman whose "yes" changes her life forever, bringing the joy of a baby's birth; the ups and downs of bringing up a child; the wonder at all his life would mean; the pain of his untimely death; the knowledge of his transforming power.

And what about Joseph? An honourable young man, betrothed to Mary, who presumably experienced pain and confusion when he discovered that she was expecting a baby. Courageous enough to commit to life with her and her baby. Anxious to provide for and protect his family. A man whose life presumably didn't turn out quite as he might have expected, yet so much the richer for that.

The shepherds, too, make an appearance in this nativity scene. Ordinary people who become witnesses to something extraordinary. And in a few days' time the wise men will arrive, brought to the scene by a bright star, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, yet coming to realise that the greatest gift will be the one that they receive.

At Christmas we celebrate the light coming into the world. Those words from John's gospel that we hear each year are so evocative, speaking of a light that overcomes darkness. They are words of comfort and reassurance, and they are also words of challenge.

Challenge because there is still darkness in the world, and we are called to bring light into those situations. That's what Ava did for Edgar, identifying with his sadness at being misunderstood, and playing her part in showing others the gifts that he could bring. And Ava received a gift, too, because we are all enriched by our relationships with others, especially where we are let into their lives and allowed to share in their joys and sorrows.

The presence of God among us is also challenging because there is a call to allow ourselves to be transformed. In the words of John's gospel, to recognise that we are indeed born of God, and to allow our lives to reflect that. We have somehow domesticated the crib scene, and there are good reasons for that. It is so important that we are able to feel God's love; to recognise it as being something very close; to know that it is a love that we are part of.

But on so many ways this is *not* a domestic scene. Jesus was born in extraordinary circumstances, and as he grew up his teaching inspired and challenged, bringing followers but also critics.

As you can probably tell, I am very fond of the story of Edgar and Ava. It warms our hearts and reminds us of so many important values.

But there is more to the story of God's love for us than that. The love that we find in Christ changes us. It helps us to be the people we were made to be. And that is a love that is available to everyone – inviting everyone else to be all they were made to be, too. As we welcome the Christ child, let's share that love, recognise it in one another, and allow ourselves and one another to shine more brightly in the image of our Creator.

Amen