



Embracing Humanity

BRF ADVENT BOOK

A journey towards becoming flesh

Isabelle Hamley

Foreword by the Archbishop of Canterbury

Embracing Humanity



BRF Ministries

15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
+44 (0)1865 319700 | brf.org.uk

Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a charity (233280)
and company limited by guarantee (301324),
registered in England and Wales

ISBN 978 1 80039 226 7
First published 2024
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
All rights reserved

Text © Isabelle Hamley 2024
This edition © Bible Reading Fellowship 2024
Cover illustrated by Ben Bloxham

The author asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work

Acknowledgements

Unless otherwise stated, scripture quotations are taken from the The New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition. Copyright © 2021 National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide. Quotations marked 'NRSV 1995' are taken from New Revised Standard Version Bible: Anglicised Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

Embracing Humanity

A journey towards becoming flesh

Isabelle Hamley



Ministries

Photocopying for churches

Please report to CLA Church Licence any photocopy you make from this publication.
Your church administrator or secretary will know who manages your CLA Church Licence.

The information you need to provide to your CLA Church Licence administrator is as follows:

Title, Author, Publisher and ISBN

If your church doesn't hold a CLA Church Licence, information about obtaining one can be found at uk.ccli.com

Contents

Foreword	6
Introduction	8
Prologue	11
<i>Day 1</i>	
1 The Word became flesh	15
<i>Days 2–7</i>	
2 He came into the world	47
<i>Days 8–13</i>	
3 Living the story	81
<i>Days 14–17</i>	
4 Embodying the promise	103
<i>Days 18–24</i>	
Christmas Day	137
Suggestions for group study	141
Notes.....	146

Foreword

Every year in Advent I find a greater sense of wonder at the idea of the Word made flesh. It just seems to be so extreme and risky. Babies are vulnerable, yet God becomes one. War zones are dangerous, especially for children, yet God chooses a war zone to be the place of his birth. Those in poverty have the highest rate of infant trauma, neonatal deaths and shortened lifespans. God is born into a poor family. Refugees combine the dangers of all the above, yet God is born in a place and time that creates enemies who force his family on to the road.

No sensible communications expert would say to the Word that this is how to get your message across. A baby in a manger sounds dramatic today, and centuries of more or less schmaltzy telling of the stories of Christmas have given us the impression that the world stopped its busy life and focused on a small and unimportant town called Bethlehem. But it did not. The Word became flesh, not with a shout of triumph but in a baby's whimper, unheard beyond a few feet. The Word lived in a small area and died with a cry unheard, again, beyond a few feet.

Yet now the world does more or less stop. As Isabelle Hamley writes about her childhood, even in an atheist family Christmas was an event; Christless certainly, but still an event, and not one called Yule or anything like that. The birth of Christ seems to stop the world in its most prosperous areas even more every year, in inverse proportion to the number of believers.

Isabelle has written a wonderful book of preparation for Christmas, a book to build excitement, open the eyes and relish the paradox of a God who loves us so much that he whispers his words of comfort and joy, heard only by those who listen. Her aim is to bring us face to

face with Christ, to go through Advent travelling towards Bethlehem, and to find out who our travelling companions are. We know some. We travel with the shepherds, the short distance from dark hillside to awed wonder. We travel with the magi, the long and puzzled journey to a point of enlightenment and then flight. But most of all we travel with each other.

This strange journey to a point of hope that changes the world is not made with chosen companions – or rather, not with companions chosen by us. It is a journey with those very unlike us, in culture and experience, in belief and outlook, except that we are going the same way. In Isabelle's beautiful and thoughtful writing, the barriers we put up against those too 'other', too unlike us, are dissolved over the weeks of Advent, so that the end of journeying is a destination that draws us before the face of God translated into human understanding, and a journey in which we discover one another better.

Two changes come when Advent is travelled well. We change our understanding of God, and we change our understanding of what it is to be part of the church, that vast number who follow Jesus Christ, the baby in Bethlehem.

Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury



Introduction

I grew up in a world without Christmas.

As a child in a virulently atheist family, going through the highly secular French education system, I simply did not hear the story of Christmas until I was a teenager. Of course, we had a tree and presents, and as an avid reader I came across rumours of Christmas in books, but nothing concrete or explicit. Christmas was just a cultural artefact, a time to get presents and endure distant relatives. Magic and wonder waned as soon as I stopped believing in Father Christmas (no mention of ‘Santa’ in my family, that would have been far too religious).

Watching my first nativity, age twelve, was a revelation. The sheer wonder of it still gives me goosebumps: the hard journey, the promise of a star, the extraordinary baby unrecognised while an indifferent world goes by. I still love nativities. In particular, I love school nativities. They’re a wonderful, chaotic, odd take on the Christmas story. Sometimes they are so chaotic it is actually difficult to recognise much of the Christmas story in there, in between unicorns, aliens and robots. I love them, because they tug on a familiar story – after all, even in the weirdest, most outlandish interpretations, you still have Mary, Joseph and Jesus, and the wonder of the birth. At the same time, they bring in so much else – all the strange, quirky aspects of our humanity, with joy and celebration that we can’t always explain, and the occasional bunfight between ox and donkey. School nativities are a cacophony of humanity. And this is the world, the people God has come to walk with, in their habits and cultures and choices, even the questionable ones.

Even when the message passes by those gathered, focused as they are on taking pictures of their own little cherubs dressed in makeshift

donkey costumes, nevertheless, in this echo of the story, there is something of God-with-us, still often unrecognised, but present nonetheless. There is still something of God coming into the reality of our lives, right in the midst of them, and taking shape in the particularities of where we are. Christmas points us to who God is, but it also points us towards what it means to be human and how God chooses to become one of us.

The 21st century is a strange time to be human. Today rumours are not of God made flesh, but of artificial intelligence, which may make many humans redundant. God became flesh, but human beings seem constantly eager to escape being flesh: we make disincarnated, disembodied 'intelligence', in our image. We try to flee our bodies in virtual reality, and modern medicine gives us ways to change the bodies we do not like or want and prolong life far beyond previously natural ends. What can the Christmas story tell us about who we are in this changing world? What does it mean for the Good News to be good news for the whole human person, rather than just minds or souls? Who are we called to be, as we walk with the God who walks with us?

To be a Christian is to believe that God, the creator of the universe, is beyond anything we can imagine or fathom. Yet it is also to believe that this God, who created us, stooped to earth and chose to become one of us. It is to believe that in God's eyes, our humanity is not something to transcend, but something to embrace.

This Advent, I invite you on a journey to explore humanity in the light of Jesus' coming. Each day, we will explore a different aspect of Jesus' humanity, of God's wholehearted embrace of the world he created. Humanity is not an easy thing to live with; we often struggle with our limitations, and the realities of a physical world we cannot ever fully control, and a human world of interactions that brings as much pain as it brings joy. And yet this is the existence that God chose and embraced. God brought salvation not by removing us from our humanity, but by entering it and inviting us into a journey of transformation within it.

Dwelling on the person of Jesus is an invitation for all of us to befriend our humanity, explore God's call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and learn to live life in all its fullness – the life of humanity reconciled to God, to one another and, perhaps hardest of all, to itself.





DAY 1

Prologue

The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.’

LUKE 1:30–31

‘Do not be afraid.’ Four little words, and one of the most frequent commands given to human beings in the whole of scripture. The command always seems a little ironic: after all, God and angels only ever need to tell you to not be afraid when there is something frightening just round the corner! In the Bible the words ‘do not be afraid’ are, however, almost always accompanied by another set of words: ‘For I am with you.’ God tells us not to be afraid, not because there is nothing scary, nor because there is no danger or difficulty ahead, but because God is with us. God’s presence overshadows and overcomes whatever it is that we may be afraid of.

In Luke, the story of God’s journey towards embracing a human form begins with these words, ‘Do not be afraid.’ These are words that tell us much about being human: being human is a dangerous, risky business. Human beings are small creatures in an immense universe, subject to all kinds of forces, not least their own destructive impulses. But God says, ‘Do not be afraid.’ The angel’s first greeting was, ‘The Lord is with you!’ So the presence of God is already assured. But something new is happening. After the familiar words ‘do not be afraid’ comes the usual refrain, in unfamiliar form. It is another assurance of the

presence of God, but this time in strange, unexpected fashion: 'You will bear a son.' 'God is with you' now takes on a much more intimate, almost invasive meaning. God will be with Mary, and all humanity, in a completely different way. God is coming to 'be with' his creatures by sharing their humanity.

We often say that Jesus was fully human, and that therefore he experienced the whole range of human emotions. I wonder whether he was ever scared. I wonder what it would have been like, for the God of all immensity, the God who flung stars into space, in that instant, to be reduced to a newly implanted embryo – just a few cells, small, contained, unseeing, unhearing, completely dependent on the lifeblood of another.

We often think of the incarnation as Jesus being born. But God came to be with humanity in Jesus nine months or so earlier, as a foetus slowly growing within Mary. Nine months of being confined, surrounded, enclosed within Mary's humanity. Nine months of waiting and growing into humanity. Nine dangerous months, and an even more dangerous birth – infant and mother mortality was high in the ancient world.

God made flesh was risky business – for mother and baby alike. 'Do not be afraid' was quite clearly the right greeting. But God is with us. God embraced humanity and did not take any shortcuts, however much easier it would have been!

The long wait before Christmas matters – God is present with his people, but hidden, barely noticed and dismissed. Mary probably wouldn't have been believed; her pregnancy wouldn't have been noticed for a while, and once it was, villagers around her would not have discerned the presence of God. They would have seen a teenage girl, pregnant out of wedlock. The first person we are told who noticed the presence of God was another baby: John the Baptist leapt in Elizabeth's womb in recognition (Luke 1:44).

Human beings aren't very good at recognising God. That's a consistent thread in the story – they look in palaces and high places, among luxury and ease, when God is hidden in faraway, irrelevant, humbler places. What do we fail to notice today? Where is God at work, this Advent time, around us?

If God wanted to embrace humanity, to self-reveal in ways humans could understand, why not come in a more obvious way? God comes softly and quietly, and enters the common life of humanity, the ordinary and routine. God embraces the reality that to be human is to be one of many, to live a life marked by what is ordinary, and makes it extraordinary.

These weeks of Advent are a time to befriend the ordinary and look for signs of God within it, not simply looking ahead to Christmas, as if all that matters is the destination we want to reach. The journey matters; the waiting is important, but not because waiting is a good thing in and of itself. Waiting matters because it prevents us from missing out on where God is at work *on the way*. And it is those signs of God already at work that prepare us to welcome Christmas Day in its glorious fullness and not look for God in the wrong places.

It is easy to overfocus on the end of the journey, the great event, to such a degree that our life is lived in the future, without attending to the present. When my daughter was little, we started a little tradition. We put up the empty crib in the lounge on Advent Sunday, and then dispersed all the different actors of the nativity around the house. Shepherds and sheep in a field faraway (but near a window so they could see the angels come!); the wise men furthest away from the crib, on a long journey; Mary and Joseph waiting in Nazareth in the dining room; a star suspended from the highest place over the stairs. Every day, we moved the characters a little nearer the crib. We told stories of what the wise men saw on the way. We gathered lots of different sheep around the shepherds. We took Mary on a journey to see Elizabeth and back.

Ahead of Christmas, all these characters were already moving, listening, acting in ways that showed God at work in their lives and in the life of the world. Christmas was long in the making; it was not a one-day single event. The threads of humanity, in its wonderful diversity of cultures, backgrounds and people, were being gathered by God, brought together and knitted into the story of salvation. God-made-flesh, God-with-us, was already inviting all of humanity to come near, embracing the needs and hopes of the world, whispering softly, 'Do not be afraid, for I am with you.'

As you set out into Advent, you may want to commit yourself to noticing one way in which God is present within every day of the month ahead and write it down. What made you notice? Does a pattern emerge? How does it feel to consciously notice God at work?



*Immanuel, God-with-us,
 Help us, this Advent, to discern your presence
 in strange and unexpected places.
 May we see you in the face of the stranger.
 May we see you in the face of those we love.
 May we see you in the face of those who turn away from us.
 May we see you waiting at the side of the road.
 Help us make space in our lives and in our imaginations,
 so that the wonder of your presence
 would never cease to amaze us,
 and as we see our humanity
 reflected in your story,
 help us learn from you
 what it is to be fully human
 and made in your image.
 Amen.*

The Word became flesh

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

JOHN 1:14

To be a Christian is to believe in God, who is beyond anything we can imagine, and yet also believe that this God, who created us, stooped to earth and chose to become flesh. 'Flesh' is a thick kind of word. It evokes something solid, real, something we can't ignore. It makes us look at bodies and how we think about and treat them. We don't often put 'flesh' and 'glory' in the same sentence, and yet this is what John does in the opening to his gospel. How do we understand this paradox, that flesh is so fragile and limited and yet can be the vehicle for God to reveal God's glory?



DAY 2

Embodied

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

JOHN 1:10–14

‘The Word became flesh.’ How easy it is to read those words, on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, and forget to stop for the wonder of it. The Word became *flesh*. ‘Flesh’ is such a practical, grounded word. Not just ‘body’, not just ‘human’, but ‘flesh’. The Oxford English Dictionary defines flesh as ‘the soft substance consisting of muscle and fat that is found between the skin and bones of a human or an animal’. The word ‘flesh’ is precise, unemotional and down-to-earth. The Word, a concept, an idea, a possibility, now becomes solid, in the way that animals and humans are solid, as an interconnected web of tissue and bones that somehow enables life as we know it.

The sheer physicality of Jesus is something that gospel writers pick up on repeatedly: Jesus gets hungry and tired; he needs to rest; he has dusty feet and needs to wash. To use the word ‘flesh’ leaves us nowhere to go but to accept the unimaginable: that human bodies

are good enough, precious enough, for God to take shape within them, for concepts and ideas and ideals to be made real. This is quite extraordinary if we consider the history of the word 'flesh'. In much traditional discourse, flesh has had negative connotations. It has often been used to refer to bodily appetites and desires, usually in a negative way, opposed to the ways of the Spirit.

Scripture itself is more nuanced when it comes to talking about flesh. Flesh has a long history in the Bible. Right at the beginning, in Genesis 2, God takes out a rib and closes the human creature's flesh. And out of this flesh, another human being is made, which the first human recognises as 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' (Genesis 2:23). From then on, every human being is born, made, of the flesh of another. This very early story affirms how interconnected human beings are, and 'flesh' symbolises the deeper bonds between them. This long line of connected material bodies stretches across centuries and generations, between the very beginning and the coming of the 'Word made flesh': the genealogy of Jesus traces the origins of this flesh both through human connectedness and through the word of God.

Flesh is the material of human existence, and within it lies both dust and glory, curse and blessing, the image of God and the reality of sin. It is within human bodies and bodily existence that both the power of sin and the power of the Spirit are at work, as Paul states in Romans 7. The stories of Old and New Testament speak of the ways in which human beings move away from the 'good' of their creation and seek ways of destruction: they abuse one another's bodies; they abuse creation around them; they organise their lives in ways that cause some to have more than they need, while others' bodies are left to starve. It is within these complex, embodied relationships that sin and brokenness take root.

But it is also where salvation comes and transforms. God works with his people to transform the way they live, the way they relate, the way they value one another and creation. The laws of the Old Testament, as well as the prophets, explore ways of living that care for justice, peace

and prosperity. In the New Testament, the ministry of Jesus does not distinguish between body and soul; the Good News is good news for the whole person. Hungry, sick, despised bodies in the ministry of Jesus are seen, touched and restored to dignity. Bodies will be restored and transformed in the resurrection of the dead, too; bodies are not left behind for a better, more lofty reality. The resurrection that is promised is a *bodily* resurrection.

We often struggle with this concept. For a long time, western cultures have assumed a dualism, the idea that we have a body and a soul and that what really matters is the soul. But that could not be further from the picture of scripture. In Hebrew, you don't *have* a body; you *are* a body. To be human is to be this strange, complex mix of thoughts, feelings and flesh. The body is not something we can use for the sake of our 'real selves' or our inner sense of who we are, or that can be used by others independently of our sense of being. Our bodies are an intrinsic part of who we are, and what we do with them and to them matters for the whole person. This, then, is why so much of scripture is concerned with matters of justice, of social relationships and of greed, lust and violence – because the whole human person is affected.

And so, conversely, salvation is for the whole person. The sign of the promise at work, given to Abraham with circumcision, is a sign given in the body. Promises of renewal are clearly embodied: God promises to replace 'hearts of stone' with 'hearts of flesh' in Ezekiel 36:26, where flesh represents humanity as it should be: vibrant, faithful and loving. In Ezekiel 37, the image of sin works itself out in the 'valley of dry bones', where human beings lose their humanity entirely, but God acts in salvation by putting flesh back on bones. Later, the prophet Joel prophesies the coming of the Spirit 'on all flesh' (2:28).

In the New Testament, the word 'flesh' is sometimes used negatively. Paul, for example, talks of 'flesh' following its own desire as opposed to the spirit following Christ. But this is not about human beings as split in two between body and spirit; rather, it is a contrast between two ways of living, two ways of understanding – one rooted purely in

what can be seen, in the material, and one rooted in relation to God and what cannot necessarily be seen. In these passages, ‘flesh’ represents a world that has separated itself from God, that has limited itself – that has reduced itself to flesh, rather than the whole person.

In contrast, salvation is symbolised by the bread of life, Jesus giving himself: ‘The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh... Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’ (John 6:51, 53). Jesus’ words are pretty stark, even disturbing! This is a deeply material, embodied picture of salvation. It is the Word made flesh that changes the story and renews the whole person. And when the person is transformed, we see salvation at work in their body just as we saw sin at work in their body: through transformed lives, not just through spiritual illumination.

Everything in the story of God says something that our culture somehow struggles to understand: bodies matter to God; bodies are not despised, they are precious; bodies are not just instruments to be used, moulded or exploited, they matter in and of themselves; bodies are not irrelevant, they are the place of salvation.

For reflection

- I wonder how you feel about being embodied. As Jim Cotter says, you are ‘not a no-body, nor just any-body. You are some-body’.¹ What does this mean for you today, that your body, the whole of you, is precious to God?
- You may want to spend some time giving thanks for your body – for its amazing intricacy; for the way it connects you to other human beings; for the way in which it makes you, you.
- And you may want to bring before God all the things that you struggle with when it comes to being embodied.



*God-made-flesh,
we often struggle with our bodies,
with pain, with tiredness, with hunger;
we struggle with what we see in the mirror;
we struggle with what we do and what is done to our bodies.
Help us hold our bodies
with the care and love that you took as you designed them,
fearfully and wonderfully made.
Help us cherish the body of others
and care for their well-being
with gentleness, generosity and justice.
In the name of Jesus, the Word made flesh.
Amen.*





DAY 3

Related and dependent

Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good for the ground creature to be alone; I will make for him a helper to stand with him.'

GENESIS 2:18 (MY TRANSLATION)

For a few years I worked as a university chaplain. I once met a young woman who had come to the UK as the wife of an international student. She found life in England unbearably difficult. She was not allowed to work, and did not have the finances to study. Her English was not very good, and she found it hard to know where to go to make friends. The first time I visited her, she explained, 'I have never been alone in my life. I have six sisters and three brothers. I have never been alone. I always did things with my sisters, went out with them, I shared a bedroom with two of them. Until I came here, I didn't know what being lonely was.' In the UK, she was told that she was struggling with her mental health and needed therapy, that she had a problem being over-dependent. But I wondered, who is it who has a problem? Are human beings made to be alone? Or is it our society that is problematic, because there were so few places for her to connect, to meet others, to become part of a community? Why would it be wrong to feel lonely if you are, objectively, alone?

The early narratives of the book of Genesis explore what it means to be human. We often know them well – or think we do. They ask many existential questions with which we still struggle today: who are we? What are we? Where have we come from? Do we matter? Why are we here?

Genesis doesn't answer the questions through great philosophical or even theological musings; instead, scripture tells us a story about who we are. And the story says, 'You are not alone', and, 'You are part of something much bigger than yourself.' Genesis 2 is all about relationships. Human beings are made from the dust of the earth and the breath of God; they are indissolubly related to both God and the natural environment that is their home. Human beings are not independent, autonomous or self-made. They are connected, interdependent and need God, one another and the wider world.

How does this work? God takes a little bit of the ground, and creates a 'ground creature'. The writer here is playing with words. The word for ground, or earth, in Hebrew is *adamah*. The word used to describe the human being that has been made is '*ha-adam*' – the thing made out of earth, the groundling, the ground creature. 'Adam' is not yet a proper noun, or a name, but a description of this creature who is profoundly connected to its own environment. And yet it is a creature with a difference: it is animated by the breath of God. The ground creature is tethered to the ground, to earth, to the world, *and* is constantly animated by the reality of the presence of God. The creature is then placed in the garden it needs for its life to flourish. It is introduced to the many creatures around – and yet, the creature is lonely. Neither the natural world nor a relationship to the God of life is quite enough for the creature to flourish: they need another like them, a counterpart.

It is worth pausing here. I have sometimes heard Christians say, 'God is enough, or God should be enough', often aimed at me or friends when we were single and struggling. And yet, here, at the very beginning of scripture, we are told, 'It is not good for the ground creature to be alone.' Human beings need relationships – beyond God; they are made for relationships. I don't think that the passage is focusing on romantic relationships only. What the ground creature needs are partners, others to be with, a sense of belonging within a human community, people who will be different yet equal.

Therefore, God makes a helper. The word is often used elsewhere for God himself coming alongside human beings. It is a word of partnership. The helper is made ‘to be opposite/in front/facing’ (Genesis 2:20 in Hebrew – ‘there was not a helper to be opposite/facing him’): the implication is of an equal relationship between partners and a generative relationship. It is together that the two human beings can go into the world, tend the garden, care for other creatures and give birth to human community.

At this point in the story, when the ground creature becomes two creatures, they become ‘man’ and ‘woman’ (the words are not used before): they find their identity in relationship. Interestingly, they are united by ‘flesh’: when the man says, ‘flesh of my flesh’, the underlying meaning in Hebrew is ‘We are family; we belong together through an indissoluble link.’ Their identity was first in relationship to the natural world (the ground – they are both *ha-adam*, ground creatures, human beings), and now their identity expands through being in relation with other humans. The Bible often speaks of human beings as belonging to ‘all flesh’ – an expression to speak of all living things. ‘Flesh’ connects human beings with one another and to the natural world.

The story does not stop there, of course. The big existential questions continue, and they ask not just why we are here, but also how we got in such a mess. Genesis 3 explores the answer through another story; this time it is a story of the search for independence. Until now, the two humans lived in symbiosis with their environment, with plants and animals, they walked with God in the garden, and with one another. They were interdependent. But when all goes wrong, they seek to move from being interdependent and related to being independent and autonomous. Instead of learning right and wrong in relation to God, they look to a tree and its fruit. The tree can give them knowledge to possess, to own, to keep for themselves, with no need to relate to or learn from another. They move away from depending on God to depending on themselves. As the consequences unfold, their relationship to one another breaks down, their connection to the natural world breaks down (in enmity with the serpent and the

ground being hardened), and even their own sense of inner self and connection crumbles and they become ashamed of who they are, of their God-given bodies, and hide.

Independence is nowhere considered a virtue in this story or in the rest of scripture. And yet today, in the west, independence is usually seen as a moral and social good. We tell our children they must become independent adults. Western stories, films and economies often prize the ‘self-made man’ and the go-getting entrepreneur who seeks personal fortune or fame. We construct our world at the expense of the natural world. And we often speak of our identity as something only we ourselves can know, construct or choose.

But this is not the story of scripture. The story of scripture tells us not just that independence is not very good, but also that it is a lie: human beings are never independent. They are always dependent on one another, on their environment and on God. The question is whether they acknowledge it – and take responsibility for it. It is only when we recognise our interdependence that we can value the gifts and contributions of all within our communities: those who clean our streets, as much as doctors, as much as entertainers, as much as business executives. Without every part of the puzzle, our cities would break down, our food chain would fall apart and life could not be sustained. It is only together that we survive, in our complex society as much as in a simpler, agrarian subsistence economy. We have just become much better at hiding how much we depend on one another.

Scripture also constantly reminds us that we are ground creatures, interdependent with the natural world. The environmental catastrophe destroying our planet right now tells us this too. When human beings forget to tend the garden, to care for its creatures, to understand their place as *part of the world*, rather than *over the world*, they end up, like cartoon characters, sawing off the branch they are sitting on.

Finally, scripture tells us again and again that we are social beings. This is why Jesus keeps talking of ‘the kingdom of God’. The picture of

heaven is not one of endless individuals each relating to God independently; it is an image of community, of connection, of purposeful life together. Being social means that we are responsible for the shape of our life together. What I choose to do has an impact on other people. How I choose to be in the world, the things I do, the things I seek, the person I am, all have an impact on others around me and on the whole system. What's more, scripture tells us we are accountable for the impact we have.

Human beings are fickle creatures. We often think or portray dependence as weakness, even though all of us come into the world completely dependent on our parents and communities, and in declining years, most of us will again become dependent on others to care for us. And at many other points, in illness and trouble, we will need to depend on others. To be dependent is not to be weak, less adult or less human. Being dependent, needing others, is profoundly, deeply and beautifully human. It is an aspect of humanity that God himself embraces: in becoming a baby and needing breastmilk, care and protection from Mary and Joseph. Later, Jesus regularly accepted a dependent position: asking for water; asking for others to share their boat, their donkey, their upper room; and, towards the end, needing help to carry the cross. There is no shame or diminution of Jesus' humanity here, only a deep embrace of what it is to be part of the human race.

For reflection

- Have you ever felt tempted to hide your dependence on, or need for, other human beings? Why do you think that is?
- Who has shaped who you are and helps you be human today?
- Could you map out all the people who contribute to your life, paying particular attention to who may be hidden, and give thanks for them all?



*God with us, child of the manger,
we thank you for those who have cared for us and will care for us;
we thank you for those who depend on us;
and we ask you to help us see
all those connected to us through the deep web of human
existence.
Help us act responsibly, recognise our impact
and accept the help of others,
even as we seek to offer our own.
Amen.*





DAY 4

Fragile and vulnerable

In spite of all this they still sinned;
they did not believe in his wonders.
So he made their days vanish like a breath
and their years in terror.
When he killed them, they searched for him;
they repented and sought God earnestly.
They remembered that God was their rock,
the Most High God their redeemer.
But they flattered him with their mouths;
they lied to him with their tongues.
Their heart was not steadfast towards him;
they were not true to his covenant.
Yet he, being compassionate,
forgave their iniquity,
and did not destroy them;
often he restrained his anger,
and did not stir up all his wrath.
He remembered that they were but flesh,
a wind that passes and does not come again.

PSALM 78:32–39

‘Why are people so fragile?’ This was my daughter’s question at four years of age, faced with the serious illness of a family friend. Not ‘Why is this happening to her?’ or ‘Why is there evil and death in the world?’, as we grown-ups were asking. In her childlike way, she pointed to a

truth that we often try to avoid. People are fragile, vulnerable. They break. And it is simply part of being human; an obvious truth to her.

Just as with independence, we human beings like to pretend we are more than we are – that we are strong, resourceful, resilient – and so we often treat breaking bodies and minds as shameful or something to hide. We often disregard the reality of our fragility and put one another at risk through reckless behaviour, conflict and war.

To be human is to be fragile and to risk hurt. The Old Testament speaks of fragility again and again, and the way in which it speaks of vulnerability is almost always embodied. The book of Job explores the utter vulnerability of human beings – before nature, before other human beings, in themselves, and before an inscrutable God. Job loses his family, his wealth and his health. His body is breaking under the strain, and his mind struggles to make sense of it all. He is overcome with grief and simply wants to erase his life – he ‘cursed the day of his birth’ (Job 3:1). Throughout the book of Job, ‘flesh’ is the place of affliction; it is flesh that wastes away, that bears the marks of vulnerability. Emotions are felt in the body. The writers of Job understood what we now call psychosomatic symptoms: what Job felt and experienced, he experienced in the whole of his person, with no false distinction between body and soul.

Flesh is what makes human beings weak and mortal. The people of the Bible – Job, the psalmists – are not shy about it. They draw attention to it, again and again. Human vulnerability means two things. First, one cannot trust ‘in the flesh’ but needs a bigger horizon for trust. It is only God who can be trusted for our ultimate safety. And second, human vulnerability means we have a responsibility to care for one another, because however vulnerable we may be, we are nevertheless precious in God’s sight. These fragile creatures are made in the image of God.

The image of God therefore cannot be an image of invulnerability and strength. The image of God is seen in the very fragility, and at times weakness, of humanity. There is no human being who reflects

the image of God any less for the fragility of their body or mind. God's image shines through whether we are sick or healthy, able-bodied or a person with disabilities, when we have mental health challenges, whether we are academically gifted or gifted at sports, whether we earn a living or not. God's image does not shine through *in spite of* our differences, but through them. It is only together, in our multiple strengths and vulnerabilities, that we can see different aspects of God in one another and learn to love God through loving one another.

The coming of God into the world does not start with an adult Jesus going round teaching and doing miracles. It starts with the incredible vulnerability of childbirth. Even today, childbirth is a risky business. Globally, 4.6% of children die before their 15th birthday. The most dangerous time is the month following birth, and 2.3 million babies die annually, according to the World Health Organization, with huge disparities between countries.² Archaeological data suggest that at the time of the birth of Jesus, infant mortality was as high as 50%. For God to come as a small human baby was a risky, vulnerable business. Even beyond the birth, he would have to be cared for and protected by a community. Political unrest added to the vulnerability of God made flesh, as Herod orders the massacre of children under two in an effort to erase the possibility of hope in a Messiah, and the young family is displaced and become refugees in Egypt. The story of God coming to earth mirrors the reality of our world, in its ugliness, fear and fragility. God made himself vulnerable, because he could not have become human, flesh, without it.

As Jesus becomes an adult, vulnerability does not recede. At the very beginning of Jesus' ministry, straight after his baptism, he is taken into the desert, a place of ultimate vulnerability – to hunger and thirst, to weather, to wild beasts and to all the things that humans may want to avoid to keep themselves safe, regardless of the cost. The temptation before Jesus in the desert is the temptation of safety, of invulnerability: a temptation to deny or transcend humanity. In face of this temptation, Jesus affirms that the answer to the fear of vulnerability is neither denial nor the pursuit of strength, but reliance on the promise of a God who

loves us: 'One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God' (Matthew 4:4). Christ suffers in vulnerability as the gospel story progresses: he is hungry, thirsty, tired. He grieves and weeps for the brokenness of the world. He is threatened with stoning and violence. His body is broken on the cross, and even in the resurrection still bears the marks of crucifixion. Vulnerability and brokenness – the scars – are taken right into the heart of God as Jesus goes to the Father.

The ultimate vulnerability of God, however, is located not in a vulnerable human body, but in a heart of love for God's creatures. It is God's love for humanity that brings him to be made flesh. It is God's love that brings Jesus to the cross. It is love and compassion that bring God to share our humanity, our vulnerability, and reach out in salvation.

In Christ, we see a model of how to respond to our fragility: in compassion and care. The psalmist expresses it beautifully: 'He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again' (Psalm 78:39). Our vulnerability prompts God to compassion: 'A bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice' (Isaiah 42:3); 'He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom and gently lead the mother sheep' (Isaiah 40:11).

Embracing our own vulnerability means we do not pretend: we do not pretend to be stronger or better; we do not pretend that some human beings are superior to others; we do not pretend to be okay when we are not okay. Embracing our vulnerability means we recognise who we are before God, recognise who other human beings are before God, and accept our responsibility to give and receive care, to accept and offer compassion.

True compassion goes hand-in-hand with vulnerability, because I can only be compassionate when I open my heart to love another and feel their pain, their brokenness, their struggle. Compassion demands that we do not flee from our shared vulnerability, but stare at it, stay within

it and embrace it. It takes us deeper into vulnerability. And, together, we might then find ways of living better with the reality of who we are.

For reflection

- At what time in your life have you felt fragile or vulnerable? How has that made you feel?
- How do you respond to the fragility of others?



*Loving God,
we thank you that your love
led you to put yourself on the line.
Help us love with the same willingness
without counting the cost.
Help us when we feel fragile
and afraid of breaking.
Bring others round us
to tend to our wounds
and care for our pain.
Help us recognise the vulnerability of others,
especially at times when we may feel strong.
Lord, teach us to love
as you yourself have loved us.
Amen.*





DAY 5

Limited

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:8–12

There is a myth at the core of many wealthy societies, a myth we often teach our children, a myth that underlies Hollywood stories, reality TV and many ‘inspirational’ school assemblies. The myth goes like this: ‘You can be anything you want to be! You just have to work hard and keep trying. Look at all these unlikely people who beat the odds and got there!’ This is not new – the fabled American dream also promised rags-to-riches stories and the possibility of ‘a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement’.³

On the one hand, it is a great storyline to help motivate children to work, dream and hope, and to counter despair and the belief that our life circumstances can never change. However, there is a dark side to the belief that we can be anything we want to be. And this dark

side is: we cannot. Some people might achieve their goals, through ambition, luck, hard work and talent. But many will not, and this is not because they do not work hard enough or dream big enough. It is simply because human beings are all limited: we are limited by our bodies and minds, by our birth, by our chances in life, by what happens to us and is done to us, by external circumstances, and by the societies we live in and their biases.

The even darker side of pretending we can be whatever we want to be is that, if this is true, then those who struggle must struggle through their own fault. To believe that all of us can achieve anything takes away our collective responsibility to build a fair, just and compassionate society, where all of us seek the best possible life *together*.

Being limited is often seen as a negative today. Our world loves breaking limits – we celebrate explorers of the past, adventurers, those who go beyond the known frontiers of science; we develop medicine and push the human body beyond limits previously unknown. And yet, for all our efforts, human beings are still earthbound, fragile and mortal. Being limited is part of our humanness, the humanness that God created, loves and shared in Jesus. Jesus was a man (not a woman), Jewish (not Gentile), first century (not any other time), Middle Eastern (not African or European or American or Asian or any other ethnicity), of a certain height, weight and appearance. He was intensely particular and therefore, to a degree, limited to this particularity. And yet – Jesus represents *both* human particularity and God's reach to all.

As human beings, all of us are situated: we are part of one place and one time. We are born to one set of parents, raised within a certain culture (two or three overlapping ones sometimes), with one or two languages only as our mother tongue. Our bodies are particular and shape our social belonging – our sex, our ethnicity, our physical abilities. Combined, our bodies and stories shape our skills, interests and choices. None of us can claim to be the whole of humanity, to understand the whole of humanity. All of us are fully human, yet none of us are everything. We are flesh – and in the language of the Bible, we

belong to 'all flesh', the whole of humanity. To be human is to belong to this wider horizon of human beings, who are both profoundly alike and profoundly unlike ourselves.

There are, of course, negative sides to being limited. Sometimes it may shatter dreams, when we realise we have neither the talent nor the opportunities to become the person we might have dreamt of being, or when life interrupts through illness, tragedy or other circumstances, and we are forced to change course. Wrestling with our limitations can be deeply painful. It brings us face-to-face with our lack of control of life and with the discrepancies between our dreams, our inner life, and reality. The challenge as a human person is to find a way to live well, making space both to face reality as it is and to keep up hope that things can be different – and recognise what can and should be challenged, changed and transformed, and what needs to be accepted and lived with. There is no manual, no easy way through this. The shape of the journey will be different for all of us and considerably easier for some than for others.

Two types of texts in the Bible speak to this. One is the stories that speak of the transformation of our desires: those stories where human beings learn to reshape how they see the world, where they learn from God and from one another how to live in healthier, better ways for themselves and their communities.

The story of the Hebrews in the desert, in Exodus, is this kind of story. They have come out of slavery, but do not yet know how to live free from the habits, economy and imagination of Egypt. It would be so easy for them to go somewhere new, and live as Egypt did: grasping, hoarding, competing for resources. Instead, they are led into the desert and learn to live off manna: every person gets their fill, every household has their needs met, and no one is allowed to take more than what they need, no one is allowed to hoard or compete. The people's imagination is being reshaped, so that they learn the difference between need and desire. What was limiting in Egypt was not resources, it was the human mind and human ways.

A different type of text would be the psalms of lament. In lament, the people cry out in the face of a world that restricts them in unfair, unjust and painful ways. They cry out against the ways in which sin affects human lives. But psalms of lament do not stop at crying out: they also call for God to act and bring transformation. The psalms of lament proclaim that some restrictions and limitations are not a natural aspect of being human, but a human-made consequence of sin and brokenness. And where this happens, it is challenged. The psalms of lament radically reimagine what the world could be like and dare to proclaim hope in a different future, even in the midst of despair.

Human beings find it difficult to know how to inhabit these stories. We often confuse what we desire for what we need, and we often justify unjust systems and actions because we seek our own fulfilment rather than working together, across our differences, for the common good. This points to another aspect of our limitations as human beings: we are often limited in our understanding of ourselves, of others and of God.

The apostle Paul speaks of this in 1 Corinthians 13:9–12: ‘For we know only in part... for now we see only a reflection, as in a mirror, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.’ As people of ‘flesh’, we are often limited in our understanding of God and of the nature of life in God’s eyes. This doesn’t mean we can know nothing – but it does mean that we are limited and need some provisionality in the things we think we know and affirm. Paul is well aware of this, and in Corinth, where some were very certain of their gifts and words, he reminds them that they are limited and that, therefore, their overall guide should be love.

Love is what brings humans together, with one another and with God. It is the bond that enables us to transcend our limitations. The great mirage of believing we can be anything is to think that we can do it on our own, for ourselves. It is actually a huge limitation of the imagination, restricting our dreams and ambitions to the self. Human beings are not alone: they may be limited individually, but their limitations are a strength, not a weakness. It is because I am limited that I need

another with me. It is because I am limited in my understanding of myself and the world that I need to make space for others to help me understand myself, understand them, understand the world and understand God. On my own I see very little. Together, we see much more. Our personal limitations as human beings call us to seek out others, so that together we can learn more of what it is to be human and see and hear more of God in the world, and, together, discern how to live well in the world God has created.

For reflection

- Think about all the things that are particular, unique about you. Maybe you could make a list, and spend some time praying through them. How do they make you feel? Are any of them 'limitations'? Are any of them opportunities? Spend time placing each of them before God, knowing that God holds each of these gently, carefully and preciousy.



*God of the entire universe,
who made yourself small, contained and earthbound for our
sakes,
help us discover the sheer wonder of the things that make us who
we are,
to rejoice in our differences
and learn to see them as an opportunity.
Help us make peace with what we need to accept
and fight for the things that need to change,
not simply for our sake,
but for the sake of all those we love,
and even those we don't.
In Jesus' name, Amen.*

**DAY 6***Mortal*

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.' When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see.' Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' But some of them said, 'Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man have kept this man from dying?'

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, 'Take away the stone.' Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, 'Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.'

JOHN 11:32–39

In 2020, the world came to a stop. To parody the words of a famous prayer by Henry Newman (1801–90), the 'busy world' was 'hushed' and 'the fever of life abated'. Suddenly, business and busyness halted, and human beings were, largely, faced with themselves in lockdown and faced with risk and danger when meeting others for the necessary business of survival. Covid was unbidden and unwelcome. It intruded upon the narratives of the wealthy part of the world. In technologically advanced countries, where modern medicine is available to most, if not

all, people, we try to keep death at bay. We often ignore it, try not to think about it or think about it as an affront to the way things should be.

To be human is to be mortal, yet we are afraid of our mortality. Death interrupts, tears apart and flings us into the unknown. So of course we try to avoid it. Our fear of this final frontier, our ultimate limit, has always haunted art and literature. How do we die well? How do we live well in light of our finitude?

The final volume of J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series lingers on those themes. The hero, Harry, has had to live with the untimely death of his parents, his godfather and his mentor, as well as threats to his own life. Meanwhile, the sorcerer responsible for all of these deaths has tried everything possible to stave off his own. Harry's journey takes him to a place of recognising that those he loved died because they chose to *live* well: they put themselves at risk for the sake of others, fought for the common good and neither treated their own life carelessly nor valued it so much that they disregarded the lives and well-being of others. This kind of coming of age is common in works of fiction; stories help us work out for ourselves what we often could not work out in the abstract.

In reality, however, we often consign these thoughts to stories and theory. One of the most popular poems to be read at funerals start with 'Death is nothing at all' (Henri Scott Holland, 1847–1918). The poem aims to comfort mourners by reassuring them that death is not the end, and that loved ones can still be cherished and not forgotten. This, of course, is true and consonant with the Christian hope of resurrection. And yet – death is *not* nothing at all. In the Christian imagination, death is so significant, so dramatic, so painful, that God gave himself in Christ to conquer it. Death is the 'last enemy' (1 Corinthians 15:26). Death is so huge that when Jesus came to the grave of his friend Lazarus, he wept. Death is not nothing. It is something that looms large and frames how we think about life, how we relate to one another, how we cherish the moments we have and use our finite time on earth.

The enormity of death explains why we are reluctant to discuss it, and why we desperately need to talk about it. The Bible is not shy about death; it talks of death in its gruesomeness and pain and also of good and timely death after a life well-lived – like the death of Abraham, ‘in a good old age, old and full of years... gathered to his people’ (Genesis 25:8). A life well-lived is not necessarily long, however – the life best-lived was that of Jesus himself.

Death is inherent to those who are ‘flesh’: ‘He remembered that they were but flesh, a wind that passes and does not come again’ (Psalm 78:39). Covid reminded us in the west that despite modern medicine, despite our cleverness, despite our collective wealth, we are still prey to the monsters that come in the night. Covid brought us face-to-face with our humanity. Covid also reminded us that while we are all equal in death, death does not come equally to all. The gross inequalities of our apparently wealthy societies were laid bare in statistics that showed the uneven impact of Covid in different communities: poorer, more marginalised communities suffered considerably more, partly due to underlying health fragility and partly because they were more likely to need to keep going out to work. What might the way death swept across our country tell us about how we should change the way we live?

The Bible places human life in a curious, precarious place, in between the reality of death and the promise of resurrection. We know that death has been conquered by Christ, but we do not live free from death – yet. We look ahead to the promise of resurrection, and we are called to let that promise change life before resurrection. Jesus taught his disciples to pray, ‘May your kingdom come. May your will be done on earth as it is in heaven’ (Matthew 6:10). The Lord’s Prayer does not allow us to think of life to come, of resurrection, as pie in the sky. The kingdom of heaven is not delayed gratification but a clarion call for action today. In the curious timeline of God, resurrection has already happened in Jesus, but is not here quite yet for the people of earth. And at the same time, the resurrection promised for the end of times is already at work among us, as we are transformed and called to live the life of the kingdom here on earth.

Talk of ‘kingdom’ is difficult today. Kingdoms on earth have been associated with death, damage and oppression. They have tended to reflect their kings and the selfish hoarding of resources by the few at the expense of the many. Maybe this is precisely why it is important to keep thinking of ‘kingdom’ as we consider heaven. The king of that kingdom is a king who ‘did not regard equality with God something to be grasped’, but humbled himself, in the words of Paul (Philippians 2:6–7). To retain the image of a kingdom keeps human beings in relationship towards one another. On earth as in heaven, we are not just individuals with an individual relationship to the king. We are people in relation to one another, with a life together, with structures and systems to sustain that life. Therefore, to pray for the kingdom on earth is to let the vision of a perfect heavenly kingdom shape our vision for how to live on earth. To be aware of our fragility and mortality helps us think of heaven. And to think of heaven shapes how we may live well on earth.

Christian thinking on death therefore does not take us to a place of either despair or escapism, but to a place of renewed engagement with life on earth. To consider death prompts us to consider how to live well, shaped by the values of the kingdom of God.

For reflection

- What would a ‘life well-lived’ look like to you? How does your faith shape what that life needs to look like?



As we seek to live well, may we pray, like Cardinal Newman:

*May the Lord support us all the day long,
till the shades lengthen and the evening comes,
and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over,
and our work is done.
Then in his mercy may he give us a safe lodging,
and holy rest, and peace at the last.*



DAY 7

Loved

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.’

JOHN 3:16

This verse may be the best-known verse in the entire New Testament. It sums up the gospel beautifully. And yet, at the same time, human beings consistently seem to misunderstand it. Often, it sounds more like: ‘For God was so cross with the world that he sent...’ Other times, it sounds as if we are ignoring the ‘may not perish’. Somehow, we struggle to believe that we can be sinful and finite and loved all at the same time. It is easier to either take out love or take out the reality of our frail, sinful humanity.

But the very nature of the gospel is the opposite. We are loved within our humanity. We are loved by God as people of flesh and blood, fragile, limited and embodied. We are loved as people who get it wrong, even dreadfully, awfully wrong. What we do not need to do is either try to make ourselves like God or hide the reality of who we are. We are not loved *despite* being human, nor because of what we do or how special we are. We are loved because God is God, and the nature of God is to love.

Why, then, do we find it so hard to believe? Why is it that so much of our lives and our decisions seems to be based on trying to earn love,

anxiety about losing love or the sickening feeling that we are not loved at all and not worthy to be loved?

Mother Teresa captured it well:

The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty – it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.⁴

The Bible tells us God loves us. The problem, of course, is that these are words. They are a promise, but promises need more than words; they need to be embodied, personalised and lived out. God's love can, sometimes, be felt directly, intensely, through spiritual experiences. But for most of us, routinely, we know God's love through the love of others around us. This is also part of being human: just as we are a whole person, body, mind, spirit all in one rather than separate parts of ourselves, we need to experience God and what we read in scripture in the whole of ourselves, in ways that are incarnated in our life story and experience. And because human beings struggle to love one another, God and themselves, they can also make it harder for one another to know what love is.

Sometimes we struggle to know God loves us because we have not been loved as children – or not loved enough as children; sometimes because of what other people have done to us; sometimes because of what we have done to others and the doubts we develop about our lovableness. There is no easy cure, other than the patient, risky business of opening ourselves up to be loved by God and by others. Our fragility, together, makes it more difficult to love one another – and creates an even deeper need to love and be loved for all of us to flourish.

When I was a probation officer, I met a young man whose story has stayed with me ever since. When I first met him, he had a real swagger. He was abrasive and defensive. He seemed quite proud of his conviction for possession of an offensive weapon. I worked hard at building a relationship – listening to his story, asking gentle questions about his home life. He was only just 18. The first time he let his guard down and told me about his mum and how sad she was he had taken up with a gang, he almost instantly bristled. He let the information slip and immediately went, ‘What is this, some sort of therapy or something? I don’t need it!’

More and more slipped over the weeks; you could say he kept leaking emotional information, almost uncontrollably. He had grown up in a rough neighbourhood; his mum and grandma brought him up, but he paid them little attention. His life was lived in the streets, and the streets were rough. Even before he was a teenager, he believed that the best way to be safe was to join a group of boys tougher than him. His mum and grandma tried to dissuade him, but to him, that sounded like they neither cared nor understood. By the time he was sitting across from me in an interview room, he had seen and done things he would never forget. What was most striking about him was that he did not believe anyone could possibly have his best interests at heart: not his mum, not his grandma, not his friends and certainly not his probation officer. Life was about survival in a hostile world, where everyone was an enemy. He is the most lonely person I have ever met.

I have often wondered, what would it take for someone like him to believe that God loved him? To open himself up to be loved by others? When life has hurt you so many times, it is much easier to stop believing, to stop taking the risk to open up. And yet paradoxically, the only way forward is precisely to take that risk.

Scripture tells us of a world that is profoundly anchored in God’s love. God’s love sustains the world; *God is love* (1 John 4:8, 16), before the world even was. God’s love comes before and after us, below and above, within and without. Our entire existence is held within God’s

love: which means that our fragility is held gently, and that our need for transformation is safe in the hands of a God who knows us better than we know ourselves and whose call to grow in holiness and love sits within his own love for us.

Psalm 23 is probably the best-known psalm there is. The image of ‘The Lord is my shepherd’ is one that has comforted generations of believers. Sheep are led by the shepherd towards green pastures and still water, safe in the shepherd’s leadership. And yet the reality of life on earth is not spared them as they go through the ‘darkest valley’; even there, the shepherd both leads and follows, whether finding themselves in the valley is of their own making or comes as an accident of life or of the choices of others. Without ever stating that the sheep are out of the dark valley, the psalm, in its final stanzas, proclaims, ‘Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life’ (v. 6). The word for ‘mercy’ is also translated as ‘loving kindness’ – God’s disposition of love towards humanity, a love that is compassionate, kind and tender. It is this love that prompts and sustains God’s covenant with Israel. The translation ‘shall follow me’ is a little underwhelming. In Hebrew, the expression is often used in texts of battle; it is a word used for relentless pursuit of the enemy. God’s loving mercy will pursue us relentlessly all the days of our lives. It isn’t just that God loves us. This love is not static. It is an active kind of love, a love that seeks us out like a shepherd searches for lost sheep, a love that works constantly for the good of his people.

God’s love is active and perfect, whereas ours is patchy and limited. But as the people of God, loved by God, we are called to be imitators of God. To be loved by God is to be called to share this love beyond ourselves, and, in the process, enable others to know the love of God and expand our understanding of love itself. Love between frail humans is a dangerous business – yet it is an essential business and the core business for Christians. Scripture and tradition give us tools for the business of love. The core tool may be surprising: it is forgiveness. That is, the ability to forgive others for loving us imperfectly; the ability to forgive ourselves for loving little and patchily; the ability to

forgive the world for being a fragile and painful home. To love is to let go of our ideas of perfection and live with the reality of who we all are – and within it, find the treasures of God clothed in frailty. As Henri Nouwen writes:

Forgiveness is the name of love practised among people who love poorly. The hard truth is that all people love poorly. We need to forgive and be forgiven every day, every hour increasingly. That is the great work of love among the fellowship of the weak that is the human family.⁵

For reflection

- Today, think of someone you love, someone you struggle to love and someone you need to forgive. Pray that God would help you take just one more step in your relationship with each person. What does this step look like? If it feels too big, what would a much smaller step look like? Pray for the ability to grow in love and to accept that you, and others, love imperfectly.



*God whose name is love,
help us love as you do,
fiercely, tenderly,
patiently and passionately;
help us see your love in the face of those who reach out to us;
help us reflect your love to those around us.
As we learn to love,
give us the patience and grace to forgive
the world, others and, most of all maybe,
ourselves.
Amen.*

Seeing humanity in a new Light

God became flesh at Christmas. But how does God, who created all things, live within the limitations of humanity – limitations that humanity itself often resents and tries to transcend? And what does it truly mean to be human?

As contemporary society grapples with questions of identity, justice and medical ethics, *Embracing Humanity* deftly explores how different aspects of being human are both inhabited and transformed in the incarnation.

Through the lens of Advent and Christmas, Isabelle Hamley guides us through daily reflections and prayers, encouraging us to meditate on being human in the light of God's choice to reach out to us in Jesus.



Isabelle Hamley is a theologian, writer and broadcaster currently working as principal of Ridley Hall, Cambridge. She was previously the theological adviser to the House of Bishops in the Church of England and chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury. She has also worked as a probation officer, lecturer, parish priest and university chaplain.

