

Luke 2:1-18 – The humanity of God

I am showing my age here, but reading the Christmas story this year, thinking about God coming into our world, the description of Jesus' birth, I keep



picturing Robot from *Lost in Space* flailing its arms and saying,
“Danger, Will Robinson! Danger, Will Robinson!”

The nativity story in Luke's gospel, is a carefully constructed story, as Steve mentioned last Sunday. It is not recorded history, as we know it, but purposeful theology, looping back to the voices of the prophets, establishing Jesus' connection to the royal house of David and declaring the authority of Christ, as Saviour, over against the Roman and other political authority.

But what strikes me, reading the story this Christmas, is the vulnerability of this birth, of God being human; being born in such precarious circumstances, being born in such humble circumstances. That is what I take away from the details of wrapping the newborn in bands of cloth, laying him in a manger, of there being no room, at this time, in the guest room of this peasant house.

Author, theologian and minister, Frederick Buechner writes, “*Incarnation [is nothing less than] Ultimate Mystery born with a skull you could crush one-handed.... It is not tame. It is not touching. It is not beautiful. It is uninhabitable terror. It is unthinkable darkness riven with unbearable light.*”

We have all been thinking about the terror of being human over the past eleven days, but earlier this year, and last, we were thinking about human vulnerability and human culpability in a different context – the mushroom murders of Don and Gail Patterson and Heather Wilkinson and the attempted murder of Ian Wilkinson.

It was a trial that fascinated people, attracting significant domestic and internal media attention. For me it was because this was happening to a  Baptist minister, and in such a familiar context, a church congregation. In Helen Garner, Chloe Hooper and Sarah Krasnostein's book, *The Mushroom Tapes*, they comment on people being not being able to “*get enough of what feels, at least from the outside, like a Midsomer Murders episode.*” Hooper makes a reference to Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt's famous phrase, “*the banality of evil.*” As Garner says, it “*could be us*”. Or in Krasnostein's words, “*There's no sign over the dock that says Evil. The mundanity is always the most chilling discovery.*”

It would be hard to find a group of people more mundane than those chosen, by the nativity story, to hear the announcement of Christ's birth.



Shepherds were regarded as rough people, sleeping rough most of the time – as the text says “*living in the fields*” – and with rough

manners. Not providing their women with much protection they were seen as dishonourable and as they grazed their sheep on other people's property, they were often considered thieves. And yet it is to them that the angels come. It is to this group of people associated with and experienced with how mundane and cruel and hard and brutal humanity can be.

And rather than a robot flailing its arms, saying, "*Danger! Danger! Warning! Warning!*" News that would not be news to them! This is the news! "*Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid... for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*" And, "*this will be a sign for you: you will find a child [simply] wrapped in bands of cloth and [humbly, mundanely] lying in a manger.*"

As Terry Falla says in the prayer we said together, "*Only in the birth of Jesus do we find your Spirit sharing our human existence, entering our purposes, bearing our sufferings, undergoing our death, accepting our forsakenness.*"

This is our reason not to fear! This is our good news! This is our great joy! This is our sign! God has come to be with us, to experience all that we experience, to suffer all that we suffer, to show us God's love is greater than all the evil we do to ourselves. As Falla says, "*In this...we find our hope; the humanity of God that restores our lost humanity.*"

The most extraordinary moment of the mushroom trial was Ian Wilkinson's  speech at the pre-sentencing hearing. He spoke of his love for his wife, Heather, and who she had been. He commended his children. He grieved the loss of in-laws, Don and Gail, spoke of their shared faith, and then - as Garner, Hooper and Krasnostein put it – threw out an astonishing challenge, tough and completely without sentimentality: "*I make an offer of forgiveness to Erin. I encourage Erin to receive my offer of forgiveness for those harms done to me with full confession and repentance. I bear her no ill will. Now I am no longer Erin Patterson's victim, and she has become the victim of my kindness.*"

In the final words of their book. "*How savage we are, and how fragile. And yet, Ian Wilkinson's offer of kindness – an enlargement of the field.*"

In our nativity story too - an enlargement of the field. A baby born in such a place as none would reckon. News given to mundane shepherds. A host of angels, filling the sky, linking earth with heaven. God with us so we can be with God. Let us join with them in praising God and saying, "*Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth, peace, goodwill among people.*" 

Call to Worship (Balsa, Patrick & Maeve lighting the candles)

(Preamble about lighting lights throughout this season)

What has come into being
in him
was life,
and the life was the light of all people.
**The light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness did not overcome it.**

Opening Prayer

O Lord, this day with joy,
we worship Christ, God made human.
**The announcement of this occurrence
is so unexpected, so great,
it passes knowledge.**

Here we stand
at the centre of this bright mystery;
**Here we confront wonder so large
we cannot contain it;
rather, we are contained by it.**

We would have guessed
that, as the eternal, creative Spirit,
your presence, O God, is everywhere and always.

**But only in the birth of Jesus
do we find your Spirit
sharing our human existence,
entering our purposes,
bearing our sufferings,
undergoing our death,
accepting our forsakenness.**

And in this great reversal of expected roles
we find our hope;

**The humanity of God
that restores our lost humanity.**

God with us,
that lets us be
with God.

**Accept our thanks, O Lord,
for this your grace,
a gift unspeakable in greatness.**

Amen

Prayers of Intercession

In the spirit of this season, let us now confidently ask our God for all the good things we need:

For ourselves, as we participate in this Christmas, coping with our many different losses.

God, receive our praise and hear our prayer.

For any person we have loved who has died, for all the losses we know in our lives, that all may be comforted by your presence.

God, receive our praise and hear our prayer.

For those who are sick or who have recovered.

We pray for Rod MacMaster and Merilyn Carey in hospital.

We give you thanks that Jill Lorenzen is home enjoying family.

We ask that you lay your hand on Helen Stafford and others in the congregation dealing with ongoing health issues.

God, receive our praise and hear our prayer.

For our family and friends,

that you may bless them with hope, peace, joy and love.

God, receive our praise and hear our prayer.

For peace in our communities and throughout the world as proclaimed by the angels on that faraway hillside.

God, receive our praise and hear our prayer.

For greater understanding, and courage to enact, the love you have shown us by becoming human for us.

God, receive our praise and hear our prayer.

God of great compassion and love, listen to the prayers of these your people.

Grant to all, especially the bereaved and troubled this Christmas, the blessing we ask in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray...

~ from a complete Blue Christmas liturgy ("When Christmas Hurts") posted on **The Young Clergywoman Project** blog. <http://youngclergywomen.org/blue-christmas-service-when-christmas-hurts/>

Blessing - Christmas Affirmation (shorter)

Let the love that shaped earth and heaven *dwell with us this Christmas.*

Let the love that created humanity *dwell with us this Christmas.*

Let the love that became human...

Let the love that overcomes evil with good...

Let the love that forgives and renews...

Let us the love that causes us to rejoice...

Let the love that brings the blessings of peace...

And may we share that peace with all people near and far. **Amen.**

~in *Prayers for Christmas*, posted on the Christian Aid website. <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/>

"Refugee" by Malcolm Guite

*We think of him as safe beneath the steeple,
Or cosy in a crib beside the font,
But he is with a million displaced people
On the long road of weariness and want.
For even as we sing our final carol
His family is up and on that road,
Fleeing the wrath of someone else's quarrel,
Glancing behind and shouldering their load.
Whilst Herod rages still from his dark tower
Christ clings to Mary, fingers tightly curled,
The lambs are slaughtered by the men of power,
And death squads spread their curse across the world.
But every Herod dies, and comes alone
To stand before the Lamb upon the throne.*

Ian Wilkinson's Victim Impact Statement – Monday, 25 August 2025

Your honour, I would like to begin with a few words about my beautiful wife, Heather.

She was a compassionate, intelligent, brave, witty and simply a delightful person who loved sharing life with others.

Like everyone else, she had faults, but she actively sought to overcome them so she could live peacefully and constructively with all people.

She was generous in her attitudes and with her resources. If she could help somebody, she would.

Heather had a great sense of humour and it was a joy to be in her company. She loved learning and had a special interest in languages.

She was a wonderful wife. We shared a very close marriage relationship for 44 years. Heather was always supportive and encouraging to me. She was wise and had skills that made up for my shortcomings. Together, we faced life as a team, and we delighted in each other's company. We shared a lot of common interests and yet encouraged each other in our own particular interests.

Heather was a great mother to our four children. We decided together that she would be a stay-at-home mum. She loved our children and believed her greatest work was to raise them to be good people, with values of care for each other in the family, and for other people beyond the family.

I think that the way our children [conducted] themselves through the crisis of our illness and the subsequent legal proceedings is testament to her mothering skills. Our children were thrown into an unprecedented situation in which they suddenly had to take medical responsibility for the lives of their parents: the trauma that they experienced at their mother's death and at my near-death has left deep wounds. I'm deeply grieved by their ongoing pain.

Heather was a proud grandma who loved each of our six grandchildren. Heather took an active interest in their lives and created activities that would bring them together. Family events are no longer the same. A very important member of our family is missing.

Heather was also a fellow traveller with me in the way of Jesus, along with many other people. She took her faith very seriously. It shaped her life and the way that she lived. Heather was full of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. All the fruits of the

spirit of Jesus living in her, we encouraged each other and urged each other on to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves.

She had a particular compassion for strugglers and disadvantaged people, and that was reflected in the teaching, mentoring work she chose to do when she re-entered the workforce after our children had reached secondary age.

I could go on; there's so much more that deserves to be said about Heather. It's one of the distressing shortcomings of our society that so much attention is showered on those who do evil and so little on those who do good. The greatest impact of Erin's actions on me has been to deprive me of Heather's company and Heather's important place in our family – the silence in our home is a daily reminder.

I continue to carry a heavy burden of grief over her untimely death. It's a truly horrible thought to live with, that somebody could decide to take her life. I only feel half alive without her. My consolation is that we will be reunited in the resurrection and the age to come.

In a similar vein, the second-heaviest impact on me has been the loss of Don and Gail. They were the next two closest people to me, after Heather and our family, and again, they were good and solid people. No doubt their families will say more about them, but I would like to acknowledge their good character and their constructive influence on my life.

Our families grew up together. They were all so serious about following Jesus, and we encouraged and supported each other for about 50 years. My life is greatly impoverished without them. I have suffered severe personal impacts from Erin's actions.

I very, very nearly died. It has taken me the best part of two years for my health and strength to recover to the point that I have. I praise God for my miraculous healing, and I thank the many medical professionals who strived to save all four of us. They threw everything into our care. I joke that I know this because I have a bump on the back of my head from the kitchen sink.

It's a grief to them that Heather, Gail and Don died. Although I've made a good recovery, my health has never returned to the levels I had before the fateful lunch. I have reduced kidney function, ongoing respiratory issues and reduced energy, and I've had to face the many challenges of re-establishing life without Heather.

The challenge has vastly changed ... I'm suddenly single. The heartbreak of having to wind up her affairs. Returning to pastoral work without her help and sage advice. Unsettled sleep. Nobody to share in life's daily tasks, which has taken much of the joy out of pottering around the house and the garden. Nobody to debrief with at the end of the day. The impacts are so many and varied, some big and a myriad of small things, that no list could ever contain them.

I'm distressed that Erin has acted with callous and calculated disregard for my life and the lives of those I love. What foolishness possesses a person to think that murder could be the solution to their problems, especially the murder of people who had only good intentions towards her? Erin has brought deep sorrow and grief into my life and the lives of many others, the ripples spread out through family, friends, our church, congregation, the local community and beyond.

In regard to the many harms done to me, I make an offer of forgiveness to Erin. I say harms done to me advisedly; I have no power or responsibility to forgive harms done to others.

In regards to the murder of Heather, Gail and Don, I am compelled to seek justice. However, I encourage Erin to receive my offer of forgiveness for those harms done to me with full confession and repentance.

I bear her no ill will. My prayer for her is that she will use her time in jail wisely to become a better person. Now I am no longer Erin Patterson's victim, and she has become the victim of my kindness.