

Midnight Mass 2010 Revd Becky Leach

*O Come, O come Emmanuel;
speak to our hearts, our minds and our spirits, that we may worship you
- God with us, God as one of us. Amen.*

Well here we are again, another Christmas and thankfully a very different one to the one we had in East Barnet last year. This year, we have a fully functioning gas supply in the village, our electricians are working too and we, well most of us I hope, have warm and cosy homes to return to. So thank God that, in this respect, not every Christmas is the same.

And yet in most other ways this Christmas is the same as all the other times we've celebrated it before. There's been the same mad rush of last minute preparations, this year made even worse by the snow; many of us have been to the usual work Christmas parties; some of us may have laughed or cringed our way through various pantomimes; we've gone hoarse carol singing down at the Prince of Wales; and we've been hooked as a nation, as usual, on the same reality TV competitions, with their nail biting finals all culminating the week before Christmas: XFactor, Strictly Come Dancing and the Apprentice.

Whether you're an X Factor or a Strictly fan, whether you love them or loathe them (and I oscillate between the two) they have attracted record viewing figures again this year. The X Factor final was the UK's most watched show of 2010 - 17.7 million tuned in to see Matt Cardle named the winner two weeks ago! 14.5 million watched last Saturday's Strictly final, following a series that received massive publicity due to the efforts of the self-confessed "dancing elephant", Ann Widdecombe.

And last week's final of The Apprentice was estimated to have attracted around nine million viewers.

The figures are all confirmation that we seem to find reality television essential viewing. And I wonder why? Is it that we like to see people make a fool of themselves? In the early stages of the competitions there are certainly many times that happens. Or is it because we love to see ordinary people working and training really hard to make the most of their particular talent? With X Factor especially we get hooked on the personalities and gifts of those we're watching partly because they *are* just ordinary people - a housewife from Liverpool, some lads fresh out of school, a young chap with a hat who can play the guitar - ordinary people who have a latent talent that, with training and guidance, become quite extraordinary before our eyes. The Susan Boyle factor, the ordinary becoming extraordinary, is really compulsive viewing. And it's 'Reality TV', quite simply because the contestants are one of us.

They're just like us, one of us!

There has been another reality TV programme running throughout this week, which you may also have seen, showing the story of someone else who was one of us. I wonder how many of you saw 'The Nativity' on BBC1, a two hour film broken into four episodes and shown over the last four evenings, telling the story of the birth of Christ in modern language, though set in 1st century Palestine. It was subtle, humorous in places, utterly profound and exceptionally moving.

Those of you who like me were fortunate to catch it will have seen the excitement and freshness of Mary and Joseph becoming betrothed and gradually falling in love, the extraordinary moment that Mary conceived in the presence of the angel Gabriel, and the terrible heart-rending rejection and hatred that she then had to face from her own parents, from everyone in her town, and most movingly from Joseph himself. His gradual acceptance and faith came so slowly, so painfully, but in the final episode he took Mary's hand at the moment of Jesus birth, and together they marvelled at the birth of God's Son and welcomed him into the world.

There was so much else too packed into this utterly compelling film: the story of a shepherd facing real difficulties in his life who came face to face with the Messiah; and three magi travelling from the east who were wiser than I'd ever imagined; there was the poverty, the realism....I could go on and on about it but we'd be here all night.

If you didn't see it I strongly recommend you watch it on iplayer as soon as possible. What a film and what a story, and what reality TV! Yes reality TV because like all reality TV it's about one of us, someone we can identify with who also identifies with us – Jesus, God's Son..

But this story is not just reality TV of course. No this story is more than a story; more than a good and moving film. This extraordinary event, the coming of God into our human existence on earth, is a *real* reality that touches the very heart of who I am, of who you are. This reality is something that engages all our senses and changes who we are.

And it's this reality that has brought us here this evening. We've come from the business and noise of our normal lives, to this place of quiet and peace: to witness, to watch and to wonder once again at the extraordinary reality that 2000 years ago God chose to become one of us; to step down from heaven and to enter into our time and space.

In the exact opposite of X Factor this is the awe-inspiring event of the extraordinary choosing to become completely ordinary; God giving up his vastness, his power, his dominion to limit himself to our human form and life. God choose to put aside his universal magnificence to become a particular person, a particular man called Jesus, a man born as a baby in a stable in a small, out of the way town in southern Judea 2000 years ago, to live a fully human life in real time and space.

It's not often that we see or hear of stories of the extraordinary choosing to become ordinary. In our society and culture it's all the other way round. We're driven to constantly improve our lives rather than giving things up or limiting ourselves. But this reality is the awe-inspiring wonder of what we celebrate each year at Christmas, what we call the incarnation – Emmanuel, God with us.

And this, we know deep down, is *real* reality; the sort of reality that underpins every other sort of reality; the sort of reality that makes me kneel, the sort of reality that makes me lost for words and brings tears to my eyes, the sort of reality that demands my fullest attention – even if just for a moment. And as we kneel and listen and watch again this evening we are faced again with the important question is why? Why would God choose to live as one of us? Why did he do that? And the answer brings us to our knees, stirs our hearts and silences our mouths. LOVE. It is purely and entirely because of LOVE. God so loved the world that he sent his only son, so that whoever believes in him will have eternal life.

Jesus was born into this world for me; he was born into this world for you. God, in Jesus, experienced the same joys and sorrows, the same pains and temptations, the same hopes and fears that we face day by day. He has cried and laughed, known poverty and rejection, mourned and loved. And by sharing our lives, by being one of us, he has opened up the possibility that our lives can be lived differently for evermore. Because he is one of us he is able to bring the glory, the joy the peace and the love of God himself right into the heart of our lives, right into all those same experiences and emotions we go through each and every day. Jesus birth has made it possible for us to live in the very presence of God himself, to live our lives in and through God himself. As the carol writer says: God has brought heaven to earth so that we all might be raised to heaven: God in man so that we might all be more fully in God.

So this is the *real* reality: God came to be one with us; he came to be one with me; he came to be one with you. What do we do when faced with such a reality?_We do what we saw Joseph doing in this week's film: we question, we pray, we seek to know the truth...and then when we accept the truth we are silent, we reach out our hand to grasp the hand of God and we bow down in worship as God enters our hearts with the warmth of his love.

And tonight, as we take in the enormity of what happened in that stable in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, as we celebrate this Christmas festival once again, God invites us all to receive Christ afresh in our lives; to really receive him. He invites us to accept the gift he offers – the gift of Christ as one of us, as one with you, and to allow his love and joy to fill us and transform us.

In a moment you will be able to come forward to receive communion or a blessing, both of which are Jesus self-offering of himself to each of us. Come with open and expectant hearts, whoever you are, because Christ's light and love is for all; then as you pass the crib beneath the altar pause to gaze at the profound and deeply moving reality of Emmanuel, God' with us, God as one of us, and know once again that he is born in us today.

May you all know this reality for yourselves in a deep and profound way this Christmas. Amen.