

I wonder how many of you have got a tattoo. I'm not going to ask you to put up your hands or even show me if you do have one but I imagine there aren't many people at St Thomas's who do have one. If you watch footballers or many other sportsmen and women they seem to like those tattoos. I haven't myself but I imagine that quite possibly the shepherds that we heard about in today's reading may have had them.. After all they were tough blokes out day and night doing tough manual work so I think it's not unreasonable to think of them as tattoos.

I'd like to tell you about a friend of mine 80 years who has just had a tattoo. She has been widowed for about five years. A few weeks ago she rang and told me that with her friend, also 80, she was going to have a tattoo in a call she told me how she had got on. A few weeks later on a phone call my friend told me that she now had a tattoo. The artist was very pleasant and had done a great job and was an excellent conversationalist. There was no pain, the whole experience had been thoroughly enjoyable and she had no regrets.. My friend's companion had chosen a small tattoo of snowdrops on left arm, and my friend had chosen the words "Love Never Dies " tattooed on her right arm.

Let me tell you a little bit about my friend's family. With her husband and family they lived and worked in E London for 30 years. She was a head teacher and he was a parish priest.

They were no saints but they both lived out sacrificial lives of love and service. They campaigned for women and children's rights And police corruption, they fought against racism - it was the time of the BNP marches.
They lived lives of love.

This couple had three children all of them now working in very loving careers. One son is a male nurse and one son is a teacher in E London . The third son works for the Australian government supporting aboriginal rights.

In retirement my friend's husband was diagnosed with neurone disease. Even through this terrible illness they lived out love.

The family enfleshed what love is really all about and incarnated it by their relationships with another and by their faith in a loving God who motivated their lives

Now you might think what is all this to do with Christmas. Well, it's easy for us to focus on Bethlehem, the shepherds, the wise men and the stable.

Well yes it is But the gospel writers give different accounts of the birth. Mark and John don't record it at all. The Shepherds only appear in the Gospel of Luke' The wise men only appear in the Gospel of Matthew and there's no mention of sheep or cattle.

The thing is the gospel writers are trying to put into words is something that's almost impossible to express. How is it that God the source of all beings, embraced humanity so that we might share in the life of God? I mean let's be honest, this takes a lifetime to ponder over.

At the beginning of the service we sang the carol "While Shepherds watched their flocks by night" It's not my favorite.

It's a very literal interpretation of today's reading from Luke and doesn't really present us with a challenge to what we do about this amazing event - the birth of Christ. Whereas "Of the Father's Love begotten" does, It challenges us to reflect on the huge, universal life- changing event of the incarnation.

It seems to me that all the traditions surrounding Christmas whether it's singing carols sending cards and presents doing our best to be kind and loving to our friends and neighbors, making a special effort to remember those who are struggling or lonely, all these are wonderful ways In which we attempt to show that God is with us that somehow the spiritual and the material come together. In this tiny baby love has come down among us and love and invites us to share that love.

I wonder if you make your own salad dressing. If you do, you will know that olive oil and wine vinegar only mix together with mustard preferably Dijon mustard. Well Here's a parable of the incarnation that I've just made up. The heavenly world, the spiritual world - and the worldly world, the material world are brought together not with Dijon mustard but by the incarnation the

enfleshment of God as a baby who will be called Jesus – the one who saves, who restores, reconciles and redeems.

Yesterday I had a phone call from my daughter in Manchester. She asked me what I was doing and I said I was struggling to write a sermon.

“Oh” she said “Well don't forget it'll be New Years Eve and that's a great day for looking ahead. It's like opening the first page of my sketchbook. You have a clean sheet of paper so make sure you're challenging, give the congregation something to think about at the beginning of a new year.

Well at the beginning of this new year and there's plenty to think about. We live in dark times, Ukraine and Russia in Israel and Gaza, the rising cost of living. All these things can get us down but there is a dark side too to the Christmas story. An unexpected pregnancy, Joseph's anxiety, the birth in a shed, the flight to Egypt as refugees, the slaughter of the Innocents -- those too were dark times.

My friend also had dark times in her life especially after her husband was found to have motor neurone disease.

So here's something to ponder on in these dark times. The words that my friend had tattooed on her arm

“Love Never Dies”

