

The image on the front of Stop Press today promotes quite a different take on the birth of Jesus which we celebrated last Sunday, Christmas Day.



I remember the first time I saw the sculpture, outside St. Martins-in-the-Fields Church in Trafalgar Square. The figure shows a new born child with the umbilical cord still attached, and in a state of naked naturalness not normally associated with images of Christmas.

It is the work of Mark Chapman, carved in Portland Stone and was put in place to mark the dawn of a new millennium in 2000. There is a little step so that people and children may see the sculpture close-up.

It is something of a shock when first you see it.

The baby rises out of the stone and lies on his back almost as if he were floating on water. I like the way in which this inanimate block of stone rises with sheer and undecorated squareness to present a newly born child, offering it, as it were, to the world, and for the world to care for and cherish.

This is a bold and dramatic piece of work and I don't know what you make of it, but I like the way in which the sculptor has captured the moment, the raw baby, before any midwifery and wrapping in swaddling clothes has happened.

We were all in that position once, were we not?

I thought that the picture went well with the little poem written 500 years ago and on the back of Stop Press.

Jesu swete, sone dear
On poorful bed liest thou here
And that me grieveth sore
For thy cradle is as a bere
Ox and asse be thy frere
Weep I may therefore.

Jesu swete, be not wroth
Though I n'ave clout ne cloth
Thee on for to folde ne to wrap
For I n'ave clout ne lap
But lay thy feet to my pap
And wite thee from the cold,

The glory of child birth and the majesty of new life cannot be denied, but sometimes babies are born into troubled families and in troubled times.

Jesus certainly was, on both counts.

How tragic for a mother, especially a first time mother, to feel the need to apologise to her child for the reduced circumstances in which he was born. In the poem, the author feels for Mary's predicament as Mary speaks of the grief she feels and the tears which she weeps. She bewails her lack of clothing for her new born and offers him instead he warm breast to protect him from the cold.

This year, there has been a change of emphasis in our approach to the birth of Jesus. From Giles Fraser to the Archbishop of Canterbury, we have been reminded of the shocking nature of this birth, both in the dangerous circumstances surrounding it and in the theology which it presents.

Incarnation is not a part of the tradition of the Abrahamic faiths and is unthinkable to Muslims and Jews. It is more akin to the religions of India where incarnation is just about everywhere you look. Go to the Shree Jalaram Mandir and see for yourself.

The theology of incarnation was one aspect of the struggle of the first generations of Christian thinkers to explain Jesus through the world of ideas, philosophy and theology and they did this with one foot in the ancient faith of the Jews and one in the world of Greek thinkers. The meeting of these two different worlds would create a lot of disagreement within the church, and disagreement which sometimes spilled over into violence.

In the end, the thinkers of the 4th century church came down on the theological proposition that Jesus was both God and Human, an idea totally unthinkable to Greek philosophers and Jewish rabbis. Even more difficult was that this incarnation ends with the death of God made man on the cross. This is offensive to the other Abrahamic faiths and a key difficulty is that whilst revering Jesus as a prophet, Muslims believe that he did not die on the cross, but was revived later.

So we belong to a complex family of faith, but we are quite clear that in our understanding, Jesus was The Word made flesh, the personhood of God born to Mary in Bethlehem, and born to show us the way to heaven.