

Metropolitan Police Carol Service

19th December 2017

Westminster Abbey

The Dean

Frogs and snails,
And puppy-dogs' tails;
That's what little boys are made of.

Sugar and spice,
And all things nice;
That's what little girls are made of.

And we all know what Christmas is made of:

Turkey and ham and cranberry sauce and mince pies and plum pudding and paper chains and crackers and Christmas lights that don't work and too much cake and too much mulled wine and too much stress and too much dodgy telly. That's what Christmas is made of. What a relief it will be when Christmas is over and we can get back to the sales.

Well, some of that might be true. But if there is no more to Christmas than that, I'm not quite sure why we're wasting our time here.

So, what is Christmas made of? What does it all amount to?

A little later in the service, we shall hear the words, 'In the beginning ...'
And we shall know that those three words are the very first words of the very first book in the Bible, in the Old Testament, the book of Genesis, as well as being the very first words of the Gospel of St John. In Genesis, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.' And in St John's

Gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.'

'In the beginning God ...' Everything begins with God. God is the be all and end all. God is the origin of all that is. God, the Creator. So, before there was anything else, there is God, and God is not a single solitary being. The Word was with God and the Word was God, says St John. So, with God and also God is the power of speech, of self-expression. God is and God speaks. That is God creates. And we can say God loves. That is what we are taught by St John. God is. God speaks. God loves. And it is because the love of God is so powerful, so overwhelmingly beautiful, so vibrant and energetic, that God creates. And, because God is love and God is good, the creation is good. 'And God saw everything that he had made and behold it was very good.'

But it all went wrong. We know that. You know that as well as anyone else. If things hadn't gone wrong, there'd be no need of a Metropolitan Police Service or armies, or navies or air forces, or laws, or magistrates or judges or juries. You could all go home and tend your sheep and plant your vineyards and wait for your olives to ripen. But it all went wrong.

I imagine you know what is at the heart of everything going wrong too. People began to think they could do it better themselves. They knew a short-cut, a dodge. And if you think you can do it better than anyone, you begin to think that only you matter really. It's all about me. My way. I did it my way. One of the saddest as well as the most beautiful songs. I did it my way.

For what is a man, what has he got
If not himself, then he has naught
To say the things he truly feels

And not the words of one who kneels
The record shows I took the blows
And did it my way.

God saw everything that he had made and behold it was going wrong.

He chose a people for himself, a people who would come to know and understand, a people who would follow his way. But they got it wrong too. He sent prophets to bring them to their senses. But they paid no heed. Some they ignored. Some they condemned. Some they killed. A few people got it. But most missed the point, so full of themselves and their own sense of things.

Finally, God said, 'I will send my Son to them. They will respect my Son.' He chose a woman and sent his messenger to her. The angel said to her, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' A bit of a surprise! Mary was perplexed, we are told, and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. But Gabriel told her not to be afraid. And in the end, Mary agreed. 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' And, as we heard just now, God prepared Joseph as well to care for Mary and the baby Jesus. God's great plan to save his people from their sins, to redeem the world, began to take shape.

St John takes up the story in the reading we shall hear later. '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.' Indeed, they arrested him and beat him and mocked him and scourged him and crowned him with thorns; then they drove him out of the city and nailed him to a cross.

But the love of God could not be defeated by human ignorance and greed and rapacity and selfishness. On the third day, God raised him from the

dead, after he had visited hell and brought to salvation the just men and women of former times. And, as St John says, '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.'

So, what is Christmas made of?

Hear these words of St Paul. 'Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.'

And what are little girls and little boys made of? Come to that what are grown up women and men made of?

We are made of God. We have a body and a mind and a soul or spirit that connects us absolutely and intimately with the spirit of God himself. We can turn away from him, ignore him, deny him, spit on him, curse him. But in the end, on our deathbed, we shall know that nothing matters more than our relationship with God.

So, this Christmas, may we in heart and mind kneel at the crib and see Jesus as he really was: it was a wretched, humiliating way of being born. And remember: he knows what it's like and is with us when things are at their toughest.

God in Christ shares our life on earth so that we can share his life in the joy and glory of heaven. That's what Christmas really means.