



***From manger to altar***  
**Reverend Judith Wigglesworth**  
**Christmas Eve 2017**  
**First Communion of Christmas**  
***Isaiah 52:7-10***  
***Hebrews 1:1-12***  
***John 1:1-14***

*May my spoken words illuminate the written word and lead us to the living Word. Amen.*

*“If you want to know who the true God is, look long and hard at Jesus”.<sup>1</sup>*

Tonight we're here because we've decided to come and look at Jesus: to recall the nativity story; to wonder as Mary and Joseph did at the miracle of new birth; and to travel with others, like the shepherds, to see Jesus.

I've been wondering about the “where”, the “how” and the “why” of Jesus' birth.

*Where* is he born, this Jesus? In an animal stable – a most unlikely place to greet the Son of God. We might expect the Son of God to be born in a palace, somewhere grand and beautiful. Not Jesus. Jesus was born in a stable to be part of the messiness of our world. It's so unlikely that it's perfect. It's the perfect place for God to “show his true colours” – to proclaim without a doubt that this God is so totally involved in our world that God enters the mundane and the messy.

*How* is he, this Jesus? We heard in our Gospel reading from St John tonight that Jesus was with God from the very beginning of creation. Jesus was the

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Wright, *John for Everyone*, Part 1, SPCK, 2002, p5.

presence of God through whom all things came into being. When it came time for Jesus to be revealed on earth in human form, we might expect him to come in all power and glory. Not Jesus. God chose that Jesus would be revealed as a newborn child, helpless and vulnerable. It's so unlikely that it's perfect. Another perfect way for God to "show his true colours" – to proclaim without a doubt that Jesus understands the fulness of the human journey, beginning with birth.

*Why* is he, this Jesus? Well, the answer is "love, actually". Later in his Gospel John records Jesus himself saying: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him may have everlasting life". That too seems so unlikely. But through Jesus – his birth, life, death and resurrection – God shows us that there is "everlasting life" or "life in fullness of relationship with God", both in our life time and beyond.

So tonight we greet Jesus as a new-born, come-to-earth child. Within an hour we will come forward to the altar in remembrance of him. How can that be? There's a whole journey of Jesus' lifetime in between.

One common element that links the two together is bread.

In Hebrew the word Bethlehem is two words, and means "house" (*bet, or beth*) and "bread" (*lehem*). Bethlehem: House of Bread. Even in his birth, Jesus symbolised bread.

Then, in his lifetime, Jesus ate bread, shared bread, blessed bread. In the Last Supper Jesus broke bread in the last meal he shared with his friends before he walked to the cross.

Bread is also an image of Jesus beyond the cross. It was in the breaking of bread that two disciples recognised the risen Christ in their midst. They had been companions along the way, walking towards the village of Emmaus. And in Latin, the word companion is made up of *com* – "with"; and *panis* – "bread", literally meaning "with whom one eats bread".

So here tonight, we look upon Jesus born in a stable in Bethlehem, House of Bread. And we break bread together, just as Jesus himself did, much later, urging his followers to also do so in remembrance of him.

The stable was not at the end of a cul-de-sac, the end of a journey. It was only the beginning. The shepherds came and saw Jesus and went away changed – full of praise for God. Likewise we do not stop and gaze at the manger and go back the way we came. We glimpse the bread of life in the manger at Bethlehem, we move on to the altar to receive Christ within us as living bread, and we are sent to share the Christ-light with others.

Tonight in this journey from manger to altar you may bring with you a mixed-up bundle of many things.

Maybe there is joy at reconnecting with family, or remembering special Christmases here in Eastbourne and the bays.

Maybe there is sorrow about this Christmas for you. Perhaps someone you love is no longer with you.

Maybe you've come to look for God, or to give thanks to God.

Or maybe you've just been drawn here, not knowing quite why.

The gift of tonight's bread of life is given freely to all, wherever, and however we are. Receive the living bread, receive the blessing of Christ.

May we pray:

*Lord Jesus Christ, we see you, we welcome you, we journey with you.*

*Come to us this night as nourishment for our minds, our bodies and our souls.  
Amen.*