

Christmas, Midnight service.

What is truth, Pontius Pilate famously asked Jesus? That question seems ever more pertinent as 2021 draws to a close when everything seems to be about **my** truth rather than **the** truth. Heinz's 57 varieties has got nothing on the number of truths that seem to be flying around at the moment, which of course can make rational discussion about almost anything seem almost impossible at times.

Yet this familiar Gospel passage, read every Christmas, not only contains some of the most poetic and powerful words you can find anywhere in the Bible, it also contains some eternal truths that we can point to – and also hold on to if we feel the need.

It is important for us to acknowledge – and to affirm publicly where possible – that there are eternal truths, and not to be ashamed of saying so, even in a culture that tries to insist the opposite is true.

Unlike Matthew and Luke, John isn't interested in Jesus's human ancestry or the details of his birth. The reason why John doesn't give us any of the details you find in the other two Gospels is because he is far more interested in what Jesus's birth means for us.

The very first verse of John's Gospel speaks to that. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. That short sentence of just 17 words tells us about Jesus' origin, his relationship with God and his identity. Those very three things also make sense of our own humanity – and the Incarnation reveals that God has come to live it out in the form of Jesus. Wow

As Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible in the Message puts it, Jesus came to live in the neighbourhood. And do you know why? So that we could become children of God as well as being the children of our parents.

The fact that one person is tall, and another is short, or that one has blond hair and another black hair, or that one child is good at running and another is good at sums is interesting but doesn't really say who they are.

But what does matter is that God calls us to be God's own children, that each of us – from the newest baby to the oldest person in the world – has infinite importance in God's eyes. Even when we have messed up in some big way – and we have all messed up big time, one way or another – that means we can still look at ourselves in the mirror and say that we are God's child, deserving of love and respect.

We may find that hard to believe, but perhaps it becomes easier if we look at Jesus' human genealogy, the genealogy that John ignores. Jesus's ancestors, Matthew tells us, included adulterers, murderers, prostitutes and pretty well every other kind of sinner you can imagine. Jesus shows us how God can use human dysfunction for the good. God works with us as we are, particularly in our weaknesses. What Good News that is.

And what other truths does John tell us? Well, that there is darkness in the world. That although the world came into being through Jesus, it did not recognise him. And not only did the world not recognise Jesus, it also rejected him. And finally that no-one has ever seen God.

Even acknowledging the darkness – and heaven knows how much darkness there is in the world at the moment – can limit it and even rob it of some of its power. Sometimes we need to

name our griefs and losses, we shouldn't pretend that all is well just because we are Christians when it is patently obvious that all is not well.

And yet.

John also tells us that the light, in other words Jesus, the Jesus who was with God even before creation, cannot be overcome by the darkness, that love cannot be overcome by hate, that life is more powerful than death.

It is that truth that offers hope, it is that truth enables us to have faith, it is that truth that gives us the courage to carry on when carrying on seems so hard.

Not only did God come to live that truth out, but God chose not to have any special privileges for himself when becoming human. Rather he gave the rest of us the best possible gift and what's more gave it with no strings attached. As the Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr put it so graphically a couple of days ago, Jesus, the eternal Christ, is like free Wi-Fi and all we need to do is connect

But there is a lot more to it than that isn't there. If Jesus came to restore us to relationship with God so that He can use us to help look after the world, then part of that is helping those who are less fortunate than ourselves.

After almost two years of the pandemic, here in Scotland alone there are tens of thousands of people who have very little to celebrate this Christmas, let alone those suffering from non COVID-related illnesses. Others find themselves living on the streets, or in poverty, or suffering from abuse or violence.

Elsewhere in the world, fighting and war means people have been forced to leave their homes and leave behind their most precious possessions and go and live in a tent somewhere with no running water and little food.

And yet they are just as precious to God

The great American theologian Howard Thurman's poem called the Work of Christmas speaks to that so powerfully.

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart

We can't do all of that, but surely we can find a way to do some of it in our own small way.

In conclusion, the wonderful thing about Christmas is that it is a concrete demonstration of God's love for us, and every year we get the opportunity to affirm that we believe that God is still present and he is still pouring out his grace and mercy.

I like getting presents as much as anyone, but there is one big problem with most presents isn't there? They break, or we grow out of them or we get bored with them.

That's why the birth of Jesus is the best present of all, because it allows us to realise that we are God's children and that God loves us so much that he sent Jesus to live and teach and die among us,

But it's also the best gift of all because it is the present that never gets boring, never stops working and never stops giving.