

Filling earth with the culture of heaven

MUC@9, 25 December 2025

Alison Sampson, reflecting on the Christmas story

Opening scene: The minister is seated in the wooden throne behind the pulpit, gazing fixedly at her phone, while the congregation waits anxiously for the sermon to begin ...

Whoops, sorry, is it me? I was just praying with an app. It's awesome, it helps me be more spiritual. And it's been recommending other apps: there are so many! There are apps for prayer and meditation. There are apps for reading the Bible in a year, and for memorising scripture, and for reading a single passage very slowly. There are apps to log my spiritual habits; apps with the Ignatian examen; apps with daily liturgies from a monastery; apps to frame silence.

If you want to begin your day with an inspiring quotation, there are apps. If you want to hear sermons from around the world, there are apps. If you want to write a prayer or even a sermon or generate a sermon title, there are apps (although no AI was used in the preparation of today's service). If you want to practise Christian stewardship and build a Christian marriage and raise Christian children ... yes, there are apps!

Of course I use a few of these apps, but it makes me think: we live in a very spiritual age. By this I mean that it's entirely possible to engage in spiritual practices and to consider oneself a very spiritual person while largely avoiding the mess of being human.

This is something worth pondering.

We have a tendency to look for God in beauty: an exquisite piece of music, a stunning sunset, the soaring flight of a wedge tailed eagle; and there's nothing wrong is that. Of course we look for God in uncomplicated things, where it is easy to sense the divine.

We can maintain this spiritual ease by praying with an app. We can read pre-digested snippets from the Bible on our phone; we can listen to spiritual songs and podcasts which shore up our beliefs; we can confess our sins quietly to ChatGPT; and we can drift away from any faith community which makes real claims upon our time, energy, money and capacity for relationship.

This is all very attractive. Because while we're sitting in landscapes contemplating the sublime, or scrolling through apps and customizing our prayer lives, we don't have to deal with rude people or hypocritical pastors or bumbling church leaders or unpleasant neighbours or manipulative relatives or demanding friends. We don't have to deal with hungry people, or poor people, or aggressive people, or vulnerable people. We don't have to deal with our discomfort at being rich while others are poor, or our rage at being poor while others are rich, or our frustration with other people's worship styles.

Nor do we need to admit those nasty feelings of unworthiness and shame which seethe just below the surface. Our smart phones are elegant, our spiritual lives are beautiful, and God is in all creation: except, of course, humanity. Because, as was completely obvious to Roman pagans and first century Gnostics, and as is completely obvious to most people now, human physicality and human brokenness and the mess of human relationships distract us from the divine.

Except: which divinity do we worship, exactly? Because Jesus was, yes, the Son of God and I suppose he was quite spiritual: but he was also intensely material. Today we remember his birth in a dim dark stable, which smelled of chooks and wool and animal dung. This baby was conceived in mystery, and he was pushed out of a young girl's vagina by deep shuddering contractions. He emerged in a gush of amniotic fluid, smeared with vernix and streaked with blood; he suckled noisily from his sweat-stained mother as she nestled into prickly straw. And after the stress of the journey and not finding a room, and then the shock of seeing Mary give birth, Joseph was probably sobbing in the

corner; then the shepherds blew in, shouting and singing and rough as guts.

The little one grew up to live and work among outcasts and foreigners. He touched people who were sick and raving and rejected and dying, and he made them whole; he restored them to community. He hosted picnics and shared fish, wine and bread; he reclined at dinner parties, his beloved disciple's head against his breast; his feet were caressed by a woman's hair. He loved and wept and laughed and sang; he was impatient, and grief-stricken, and angry at times. He knew temptation; he knew rejection; he knew betrayal. Human politics shaped his birth, life and death. He knew the contours of anguish.

The God made known in Jesus Christ is not pure spirit, and does not remain remote, detached, neutral, or on high. Instead, this is a story of divinity made deeply and wonderfully material, and deeply and wonderfully human. The Word was made flesh and so ours is an intensely fleshy faith. Christ is fully known, not in abstract ideals or spiritual laws or esoteric disciplines or the beauty of nature, but in all the mess and glory of being human.

If you want a pure spirituality uncontaminated by blood and tears, sickness and appetites, conflict and politics and other people, you'll need to look elsewhere; the app store's a great place to start. But if you want an earthy faith, a real faith, which embraces our bodies and mess, look to Jesus. For he is Emmanuel, God-with-us: and he points us to the human.

So look to him, and look also among the poor, young and unhoused; look among those seeking asylum; and look among the vulnerable: for it is among such as these that the Christ-child was born, and it's through such as these that we welcome and serve him now.

And while you're looking, look around here, too, for you will catch a glimpse among us, ordinary wounded vulnerable people that we are. Like Jesus, we too experience the mess of human emotions and the complexity of human relationships. Like him, we know temptation; we

know rejection; we know betrayal. Our lives are shaped by human politics. We know the contours of anguish.

Because he has shared these realities with us, they are not foreign to him and they are not despised. Christ became flesh and lived among us and entered into the fullness of human life, so that with him we might live and die and be raised again into wholeness and the fullness of love. Christ integrates it all. The spiritual and the material, the app store and the mountaintop, the wounded bodies, the fragmented minds, friends, neighbours and enemies, and all of you and all of me are brought together into one glorious and messy whole.

So as we explore our spirituality, let us not deny the material, the human, the brokenness or the mess, but let us accept and embrace it all. Let us accept and embrace the gift and challenge of each other, and the gift and challenge of God-with-us, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel.

And with the whole world around us,
heaven and earth, angels and shepherds,
stars and mitochondria and dust,
let us rejoice.

With the animals who gave up their manger,
with the young couple who opened their hearts,
let us make room.

With the wise astrologers from foreign lands,
let us bring gifts.

And let us celebrate:
because God knows and loves
the people of the earth,
in all their bodies and mess,
and a baby was born into dirt and darkness
to fill earth with the culture of heaven. Thanks be to God. Ω