

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Midnight Eucharist St Mark's, Christmas 2007

I guess that *OK Magazine* doesn't have a very big readership in Newnham, but occasionally we all glimpse it when we're out and about. I saw the cover of the latest issue when I was passing through Boots last week (perhaps you've seen it too)– and I don't know whether to say it arrested me, or sent me scurrying on my way with averted eyes. The photo was entitled something like, 'Christmas with Jordan and Peter' – but instead of the picture you might expect, of a celebrity couple and their children sporting Santa caps under a lavishly decorated tree, what it showed was the famously enhanced 'glamour model' (as Jordan is politely described) dressed as the Virgin Mary, and holding her baby daughter, whilst her pop-star husband is also kitted-out infant-school style, as Joseph, and the two elder children also appear in nativity play-type costumes. (Who they're meant to be in the story isn't quite clear.)

The stomach-turning incongruity of this picture left a strong impression, as no doubt it was supposed to. And you, too, may be experiencing your own strong feeling, even if you've not seen the photo – some kind of surprise that I

should be talking about this magazine and its cover - now, and in this place.

We associate the story of Jesus' birth with qualities far removed from the shallow glitz of manufactured celebrities – qualities like purity, simplicity, humility, and awe. We celebrate the amazing love of God who poured himself out into a life of poverty and obscurity. Celebrity culture, on the other hand, celebrates people forcing their way up a ladder towards wealth, and above all, fame – often with no foundation of real worth for that ladder to stand on. It is upsetting if the most childlike and lovely Christian symbols, those associated with the Christmas story, are pressed into service to promote the faces and forms of those who seem to have least to do with their real meaning.

But as I took a second glance at the cover, on my way back to the door from the pharmacy counter in Boots, along with the distaste, some real questions arose in my mind. Is this a *complete* send-up, whether on the part of Jordan and Peter, or on the part of their publicist, or the editor of *OK*?– Is it an intentional mockery of the meaning of Christmas? Or is it some vague and pathetic memory from childhood Christmases in the past, the memory of a story which entranced and appealed then – something which,

somewhere, in an almost submerged part of themselves, Jordan and Peter want for their children?

I have no idea. But whichever answer is true, it doesn't detract from a deeper truth. Whatever we may feel about it, whatever *they* may feel about it, Jesus was born for that family as much as for yours or mine.. He came to set the captives free, and that includes the many trapped in the shallows of our culture – even the celebrities imprisoned behind the false facades of manufactured lives - the glamour models and the pop stars, the footballers and their infamous wives, the residents of Big Brother house – and the people who sometimes seem to be famous just because they are famous (or at least, very rich).

The Christmas story can't be confined within churches, schools and art galleries, places where good taste can be monitored and children's simplicities indulgently smiled at. The Christmas story has to be at loose in the world, to touch all sorts of people's lives – and of course, that's risky. It can be made fun of, it can be made captive to other people's desires and ambitions, it can be grossly misunderstood and misrepresented, it can be pulled apart and attacked with fierce hostility. All these things can happen.... They happened to Jesus himself.

He took the risk of coming into a world like this – and he did it out of love.

What Jesus needs now is people who are fired-up to share his love and generous spirit. People who will be there for him, among those whose lives seem to be travelling so radically in the other direction. People who don't preach or live in a judgemental way, but who live-out lives of care, integrity and solid hope based on him.

I was thinking, as I wrote this, of Christians I know who pray by name for people on death-row in the States – people who reach out in love out to the obviously imprisoned. And I was wondering if there's anyone who makes it his or her business simply to pray for celebrities and stars, who may be just as imprisoned, in their own way, by their own fantasies and those of others. I firmly believe that consistent prayer, offered with real love, can have great effects in touching people's lives for good – even if they never get to know that someone was praying for them.

But you don't have to turn to the pages of *OK*, or follow the gossip columns on the Internet, to find people trapped in the shallows. We all are, to some extent. Taste and culture may vary hugely – but the insecurity which craves glitzy fame is the same insecurity which makes people crave approval

and applause of other sorts, and in very different circles. The greed which leads to tasteless displays of wealth is part of the same impetus always to have more, and control more, that most of us are to some extent caught up in. The obsession with the body and how it looks, which drives some people to do unnecessary business with plastic surgeons, is the same obsession which sells things to *most* of us, most of the time. We live in a culture which makes it difficult, for all sorts of people, to nurture and sustain deep and lasting relationships. Serial partnerships are increasingly the norm. And in many fields, trust has become a very devalued currency, and integrity sometimes seems scarcely believable.

The wonderful thing is that if we can recognise any of these truths about ourselves, this doesn't disqualify us from being people who live out the love of Christ among our contemporaries. In fact, it's the only basis from which we can do it.

I know people come to church at Christmas for all sorts of reasons, but among them – I'm sure – is a yearning for the gifts of the Christmas story to be part of our lives – purity, simplicity, humility and awe. These things may seem very far from our everyday experience – about as remote as angels singing from the sky – and yet we have a feeling that we can

catch hold of a little bit of them here, even if our beliefs are shaky and our churchgoing sporadic.

But we come not just to catch the atmosphere to increase the gifts of Christmas within us. That would have a very ephemeral effect. If we're wise, we bring also bring the reality of our daily lives– up to the altar at communion time, into our prayers, into our listening and reflections - and we ask and discover that the things about us which seem so far from the truth of Christmas, can be, and are, forgiven. We meet here, tonight, a God whose love is so profound, it excludes no one. Not even us. He came for us all..

Meeting the God of such love, who yearns with burning compassion for all his trapped and imprisoned children, – meeting that God tonight, and whenever we turn to him, – that's the best qualification for extending love and liberation to others. We're all lost and lonely, somewhere – under the mask of our well-being. Jesus has come to find us. And with his help, we can pass this on – the true story and gift of Christmas – to others. Even to unlikely others.