

## Homily: Fourth Sunday of Advent 2021 (Year C)

A few days ago I saw a picture of the manger online. A simple wooden manger, empty except for the straw inside it. The caption alongside it read, "King size bed." There was the manger, the feeding place of animals, ready to receive the Lord. The humblest of beds for the very greatest of kings.

If you went into the bed shop and asked for a king size bed, you'd no doubt be surprised and more than a little disappointed if you were offered only a baby-sized manger filled with straw. For a start, it's hardly comfortable. And nowhere near big enough. King size means 'big'. Big things easily get our attention. We all know the names of the highest mountains and the vast oceans; we marvel at buildings of incredible height and scale. They simply cannot be missed. But there are downsides to being enormous. Mountains and oceans can be very inhospitable places, even threatening to us. Towers of enormous height can only really be appreciated from a distance. Encountering a large animal in the wild could be a very frightening thing indeed.

Here is a problem for God. God is very big. In fact, He is infinite. There is no part of His vast universe which He cannot fill and more than fill. He is eternal; He has always existed and will always exist. He is all-powerful; nothing can ever challenge Him. In many ways, this is very reassuring for us: we have the infinite, eternal, all-powerful God to turn to when life is tough. And He listens to us. But God does not simply want to be a divine problem-solver. He did not create us simply so that He could answer our prayers. Instead, God created us to love Him and be loved by Him: He calls us into relationship, into friendship with Him.

So the eternal, infinite, all-powerful God, realising that He is beyond our grasp, chose to become small for us. He entered into our world as a baby in Bethlehem, so that we could appreciate Him not only from a distance, but close up. He came in the most unthreatening, vulnerable way, so that we would not run from His power. He entered into time, so that we would not be overawed by the thought of eternity. In the stable at Bethlehem, God makes Himself accessible to us, available to us, even comprehensible to us. And He asks for our love.

And in this act, in taking on human nature, He makes Himself limited. He experienced hunger and thirst, tiredness, frustration, grief, fear and all the things which make life hard for us. He experienced the effects of human sin, even though He Himself lived a life of perfect love. The baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and confined to a manger is a powerful sign that God has limited Himself, bound Himself, confined Himself for our salvation. It's true that in adult life Jesus worked many miracles, including miracles over nature, but these were particular moments for the specific needs of those He met: He never used His divine power to help Himself, but lived and died in a way which was as limited and as vulnerable as we are. And so, when we experience hunger or thirst, tiredness or frustration, anxiety or grief, we know that Jesus is with us; God is with us. He comes in gentle, quiet ways: a moment of consolation in prayer, an encouraging word of Scripture, the Host which we receive in Holy Communion. These ways are fitting for the God who

walked gently through the garden of Eden, who revealed Himself to Elijah in the gentle breeze on Mount Horeb, who chose to come amongst us as a baby in Bethlehem.

In the beautiful crib scene we see a God whom we can accept and welcome, a God who makes Himself like us, a God who can be appreciated close up. The other great feast of the Church's year, Easter, reminds us that God has power even over death, and that, in the end, His love will conquer every single affliction that we suffer on earth. But this feast, the great feast of the Incarnation, reminds us that God is with us in our sufferings. He is close, He is accessible to us. God does not want to be appreciated from a distance and called upon only in times of need, like some divine helpline. He wants to reveal Himself to us, to let us know Him and find joy in this friendship. He wants to build a relationship of love and trust with us. And so He comes as a child: a child in need of food, shelter, and most of all, our love. His king-sized bed was a simple feeding tray for animals. That was good enough for Him. Perhaps there is also a King-size space in our hearts, messy and imperfect though they may be, to welcome Jesus, our King and Saviour, and to accept His friendship.

Fr Andrew

