

What does the Christmas story mean? What does it mean to speak of a child in a manger? A manger is a trough; it is a place in which food for the animals is put. The Christmas story, the star, the manger, the shepherds, the wise men and the gifts, is a faith narrative or, if you prefer, a carefully crafted myth: it is theology, not history. Jesus was placed in a manger, a place to hold food. Could it be that the writers of the ancient world wanted us to understand this one thing: that Jesus is spiritual food for this life? I believe that is exactly what they are telling us. Jesus is spiritual food for this life.

Did you hear Martin Riddall speaking on Monday standing outside the court in Bristol? Rachel and Martin's 11 year old son, Sam, was killed on the first of May. He was hit by a car driven by mother of two, Hannah Saaf. Hannah was high on cannabis and travelling at more than twice the speed limit. Young Sam had just been to a church youth service. On Monday, outside the court, his father, Martin said:

It's going to be very hard for us indeed, because we still miss him very much. At Christmas we remember that God sent his son Jesus into the world to bring peace. It's the same God that is giving us the strength and helping us to forgive Hannah for the terrible thing she's done to us by killing our son. It's not easy, it's not going to be easy. But with God's help we know that it is possible.

Jesus is spiritual food for life. God never intervenes to stop cars mounting pavements, never intervenes to prevent tsunamis, shootings or a holocaust. Crude magical miracles which suspend the laws of nature are not real and are a misinterpretation of Scripture. And yet, openness to God in our lives, to the spiritual, does in time make a difference. What you are hearing in the words of Martin Riddall is the voice of the Eternal, which inhabits his life. We cannot be trite here. The tragedy is too great. We walk on holy ground and from their aching darkness the parents spoke of forgiveness. Did you see the stature of their humanity?

The talk show host, Oprah Winfrey, once interviewed the then First Lady, Hillary Clinton. Winfrey asked Mrs Clinton, 'If you had the opportunity to recommend one book, just one book, to the American people, what would it be?' Mrs Clinton chose the work of the Dutch priest, the late Henri Nouwen. Mrs Clinton said that Nouwen's insight and personal spirituality had helped her through her most painful and darkest times in the White House and in her life. One of Nouwen's books is entitled, 'Adam: God's Beloved'. The book is about his very deep love and friendship with Adam, a young man whom he met at a L'Arche community. Adam had severe learning difficulties. Nouwen writes:

Adam's humanity was not diminished by his disabilities. Adam's humanity was a full humanity, in which the fullness of love became visible for me, and for others who grew to know him.....Adam couldn't

say, 'I love you,' he couldn't embrace me spontaneously or express gratitude in words. Still I dare to say we loved each other with a love that was as enfleshed as any love, and was at the same time truly spiritual. We were friends, brothers, bonded in our hearts. Adam's love was pure and true. It was the same as the love that was mysteriously visible in Jesus, which healed everyone who touched him.

Nouwen said that Adam's humanity was not diminished by his disabilities, that his humanity was a full humanity and that the love he had for others was pure and true and the same as that love which was mysteriously visible in Jesus, which healed everyone who touched him or was touched by him.

This is what Christmas is about; this is what the Christmas story is about. Tied up in all that mythology and narrative is the message, enfleshed, embodied in Jesus, that love is the purpose of life. Jesus is spiritual food for us because he teaches us about God's unconditional love for each one of us, he teaches us the importance of loving others, even our enemies, and he teaches us to love ourselves.

Loving ourselves is an important though, at times, a difficult lesson to learn. Without love and acceptance of ourselves, we will struggle to love others and struggle to believe in the love of God for us. Not now, because tonight is a happy night with a happy message. But there is a need to make time to pray,

meditate and silently reflect on who we are. Only once we can acknowledge and accept our failings, mistakes, weaknesses, regrets and, in the end, vulnerability will we truly begin to accept and love ourselves, accept and love others, and believe deeply in the love of God for each of us as we are. My guess would be that Martin Riddall was able to speak of his faith in God and of his forgiveness of Hannah out of a love for her rooted in his own acceptance of his own failings and shortcomings. Once we understand and accept our own brokenness we are in a better position to accept and understand the brokenness of others. Jesus is spiritual food for this life.

Part of Adam's brokenness was there for all to see: his severe learning difficulties made life hard for him and for those who cared for him. Our brokenness, though often less visible, is no less real. Jesus is spiritual food for life and everyone who is touched by him or who reaches out to touch him will be changed. That has been the Church's story for two thousand years and that's what you heard from Martin Riddall at the beginning of this week.

Amen.