

The Virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means 'God is with us' (Matthew 1 v 24)

What do Mary, and St Mary's Maldon, mean to you? Would you trust them with your sorrows, for example? Would this be a good place to come and weep when life got overwhelming and there was nobody here, just you and the silence? Have you ever lit a candle here before the statue of Mary, who is the Queen of Sorrows? Many people do. I remember a couple of Holy Weeks ago, I was humping tables out of the bell tower into the Octagon, when a young woman came in, sat and wept for 10 minutes or so, and then left. Mike and Pat Taylor, who lost their daughter, told me that the silence and also the Hail Mary, are a place and a moment of deep healing.

The most important things are not rational. They are not irrational; they are non-rational. Rationality is there to guide us through the nonrational. Why does that beautiful film star leave me cold and that very ordinary girl make my heart miss a beat? What is the reason? There is a reason, but I do not know what it is. 'The heart has its reasons that reason knows not of' (Pascal).

I want to encourage you to love things that you know to exist, but which cannot be known. That you and the person beside you in church this morning are unknown mysteries. This is why I struggle so much with extreme atheists and with extreme fundamentalist Christians. They both know, for example, that Christianity is something that it isn't. The atheist knows that Christianity is myth, or at worst, gobbledygook. The fundamentalist Christian knows that the fact that we go to heaven is a truth of the same order as that 2 and 2 make 4. They are on the same grounds as one another but at opposite ends, which is, in the last resort, the same thing.

I want to say to everyone in this church, and to people everywhere— we are all in the same boat. Sue Mayes said in my hearing the other days, that she doesn't like labels, and I agree with her, except that sometimes they are necessary. For, example, I love my Muslim friends Mohammed and Bahea, and my atheist friend, Alastair – our differences have some importance, but ultimately we are in the same boat, fellow pilgrims, sailing on the sea of mystery, which I have to call God, because I have to use language, even though in the last resort, all language, all explanation, fails. Perhaps you call this mystery something else. But woe betide those who say there is no mystery. One day science will explain everything. That kind of science exercises the same imperial dominance which once religion did, and it is harmful.

Take for example today's language: 'a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel, which means "God is with us".'

I am not saying that there aren't things to be said for and against the literal truth of the Virgin Birth. I don't want to discuss them here. Why has the Virgin Birth and Emmanuel, God with us, survived for 2000 years, in art, in music, in literature, and in the piety of people who walk into churches like this at times of sorrow and of joy?

Well, the Virgin Birth tells the story of something amazing coming in the darkness, as it were, absolutely out of nothing. What would your virgin birth look like – something extraordinary arising in you from nowhere, you who are old, tired, haggard and disillusioned. And Emmanuel. God is with us. Whatever else this means; it means something about us. You are more than you think you are. If you dare to believe it, and to follow where your own star is leading you, there is far more to you than you could ever possibly imagine, and this church is a school of the spirit, where we search together for where the baby of the truth about all of us is laid. Whether you are a strongly believing Christian, an agnostic, an atheist, a Muslim or Jew, is really neither here nor there – it's wanting to be part of the adventure that matters.

Mohammed and Bahea are intending to come to church on Christmas morning. Can you imagine the absurdity of my saying to them, 'but you are Muslims. Your place is the mosque.' It is thrilling that they want to be here, and that we can love each other, as we could not have done in the past. Because God is doing a new thing. Even now it is breaking from the bud.

Last week Boris Johnson said that we have got to stop giving foreigners the impression that they belong here.

But this new world that I am encouraging you to enter with me, the world of our virgin birth, of our emerging from nowhere as the sons and daughters of the living God, cannot possibly think like that.

Because 'Emmanuel, God is with us', must mean, in the profoundest way we could possibly imagine, that we are also with one another – all of us. Amen.