

## Midnight Mass sermon by Geoffrey Howard, 24<sup>th</sup> December 2015

A 1980's film, *Children of a Lesser God*, concerned a deaf and dumb girl, filled with frustration and rage because of her inability to communicate with others. A young speech teacher falls in love with her. It is a stormy courtship for she cannot believe she is loveable. There is a memorable scene where the teacher returns late one night to his deserted school. Desperate to share her world of silence – a world in which she cannot even hear her own screams of rage - he immerses himself in the deep end of the swimming pool, attempting desperately to enter for a little while the cocoon of soundlessness in which she is imprisoned. An illustration of the fact that lovers always seek to identify with the one they love. This is love's touchstone. Shakespeare writes of two young lovers exchanging eyes. Each sought to see the world through the eyes of the other. Anyone who has been in love will know what he means.

The Danish philosopher, Kierkegaard, wrote a parable about a king who fell in love with a poor girl. How was he to win her love? He could raise her to his own rank, share with her the splendour he himself possessed, but that would testify more to his power than his love. He could, as in a fairy tale, disguise himself as a beggar. But true love, he decided could not be based on deception. He concludes that his only course is to divest himself in reality, not in pretence, of all his power and wealth. He becomes as poor as the girl herself in order to win her love.

I don't need to tell you that this is Kierkegaard's rendering of the Christmas story. This is the reality that lies at the heart of Christmas. This is what the gospel writers are striving to share with us in their stories of wise men, shepherds, angels and a young, poor family having to put up with makeshift accommodation. They ransack poetry and myth and stretch language to breaking point in their eagerness to disclose to us the significance of this stupendous event.

*He came down to earth from heaven, who was God and Lord of all.*

He came down to earth that we might ascend to heaven; he shared our humanity that we might share his glory.

But let me tell you of my late mother-in-law's eightieth birthday party. She was much involved with deaf and dumb people and she insisted that the entertainment at her party should include a deaf and dumb choir - a choir which couldn't utter a word or sing a note. But to the sound of a piano, and led by a hearing person, the mute choir used sign language to harmonise with the music and convey the meaning of the songs they were singing. When my mother-in-law told me of her plan, I feared it would turn out to be an awful, embarrassing fiasco. In fact it was deeply moving. For a brief moment these people who lived in a world of silence entered the world of music, inadequately it is true, but for too little a time this was the reality.

At Christmas, from out of the eternal silence, God speaks his Word. A Word made flesh in the form of a baby. A Word which is wordless, for a baby is as speechless as the young woman in the film and those in my mother-in-law's choir. And to attempt to respond to this mystery with speech is a futile exercise. Our only response must be adoration.

I don't stand in this place tonight because I think I am good. I stand here because I am loved. This is the mystery of Christmas. Love came down at Christmas time. God's Word has been spoken. The eternal silence has been broken. The angels sing their song of peace, and if, beyond the fairy lights and tinsel, you catch a glimpse of this mystery and hear but a fragment of this music your journey here tonight will not have been in vain.