

Song of the Stars, by Sally Lloyd-Jones, illustrated by Alison Jay.

[read the book]

This is a beautiful depiction of the incarnation: 'The one who made us has come to live with us.' Or, as our gospel reading puts it... 'the Word became flesh and lived among us.' In the children's story that I've just read, the whole natural world knows in its furry, feathery heart that 'it's time!' From the stars to the stallions to the salmon in the rivers, all creation waits and watches. But, according to our gospel reading, when Jesus was in the world, the world did not know him, and did not accept him.

The difference, of course, is that the 'world' that John refers to is the human world. And there are no humans in this children's story, except the mother, who has spent nine months preparing for the gift.

Over the years I have read many children's picture books of the Christmas story. And what is common to all these books is the animals. Every single one of them has animals gathered around the newborn baby and his parents. Which is curious, because if you read the Gospel accounts of Jesus' birth closely, there are no animals mentioned except the sheep out in the fields. Not even the donkey that we imagine carried Mary on the journey to Bethlehem. But in the Christmas story of our imagination, there are animals. In our Christmas carols, there are animals. In artists' pictures of the nativity scene, there are animals. And in the children's stories, there are multitudes of animals. Is this just because children like animals? I don't think so. It might be closer to the truth to say that children realise something about animals that we adults have forgotten.

I think there's something important in this impulse to surround the newborn Jesus with creatures of the earth. There's something in the way we feel about what is going on in this holy moment, that is best expressed by the presence of the non-human world. And because the gospel text doesn't supply it, we have had to do that ourselves, in art, song and story. Somehow, the inner truth of this event demands it.

And what is that truth? It's the holy mystery of God being born as a vulnerable baby within the world that God made. It's the affirmation that God chose not to look on our struggle and difficulty from afar, but to become immersed in it. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot extinguish it. This mystery ripples out from the manger in Bethlehem through the entire universe. The Creator has become the created.

As thinking adults, we can experience disbelief, even resistance to the idea of God-with-us. We wrestle with the 'how', and the implications of such a far-fetched notion. We all struggle at times to recognise and accept the one who has come to his own.

But at the same time, we also sense that this story is one that we must receive in the heart, in simplicity, in devotion, in reverence. Perhaps it's easier to find our way into this silent, loving witness by way of the natural world. Animals and children, with their uncomplicated presence, bring us to kneel beside the manger of the newborn miracle.

We complex adult humans often fail to accept that, despite all the amazing things we know and can do, in some respects we are limited. By insisting that we are rationally superior to animals, sometimes we miss out on the knowing that comes from being a creature among other creatures. Sometimes we miss out on wonder, and awe. We need a greater wisdom, a bigger mind, that holds and infuses our own and leads us into the ways of knowing and being that lead to peace.

Without this larger wisdom, we revert to information and technology. We remain bizarrely committed to the fiction that we can think or fight or invent our way through all the problems that we face as humanity, that we need no salvation, no grace, no rescue from the troubles we've unleashed on our earth. It takes humility to know that we cannot fix this mess we're in – the violence, the conflict, the loneliness and the pain. We can't fix these things in ourselves, let alone in the world.

Our Christmas story of incarnation reminds us that we don't have to go far to find the God who is in all life, and who embraced our flesh and blood existence. This isn't information, or artificial intelligence. It is *presence*. God with us. This whole earth echoes the Word that breathed it into being and sustains it still. Perhaps it is only we humans who have forgotten our place in that story. Christmas can awaken us to it again, placing mystery in our hearts once more.

By our presence here this morning, we are joining in the song of the stars. While most people right now are opening their presents and cooking their Christmas lunch, we have come to witness the candle flickering in the window, to listen for the tiny cry. We join with all that God has made, from tiniest bug, to the great ocean whales, from the atoms to the angels, to say 'It's time!'

Christ's coming happened once in time, but is happening still in every moment, which is why we celebrate this mystery year by year. May God open our hearts and grant us the simplicity to receive the holy birth again today.