

What if God was one of us?

*What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us;
Just a stranger on the bus,
Trying to make his way home.*

I wonder what your reaction is to these lyrics? The words come from a song by Joan Osborne. She asks a question about Christmas even though it might not be very Christmassy! 'What if God was one of us?' If you are on the internet, why don't you Google it.

I wonder what you think about the different lines of this, the second verse of her song? **What if God was one of us?**

The founding story of Christianity is that God is one with us and that God became one of us. Here's a counter-lyric which is sung in church in the run up to Christmas. It speaks of the same mystery and truth:

O come, O come, Emmanuel,
and ransom captive Israel,
that mourns in lonely exile here,
until the Son of God appear:
*Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
shall come to thee, O Israel.*

As you will no doubt know, the name Emmanuel means 'God with us'. It speaks of a God who rescues us by coming to us. Advent is about waiting, waiting not for Christmas as a date but for Christ as the one who comes to us. This hymn speaks of a sense of exile on earth, being a stranger on earth. Do you sense that?

Christmas celebrates this revolutionary belief. That God took on human form, became fully human and yet remained fully God, when he came to earth as a vulnerable baby. This is the mystery of the incarnation; that God identifies with humanity, all humanity - even slob.

Just a slob like one of us? Just how far does God go to identify with you and I? After a long hard day is God with us as we slob out on the sofa, relaxing? Why not? But perhaps something makes it difficult to think of God being a 'slob' like one of us. It is a line that jolts, that shocks. It is no more shocking than the thought that God has come to us and is with us, a thought we have perhaps become rather too

comfortable with. I am sure God is with us relaxing on the sofa as much as in our service of others. However, I believe God makes himself absent when we enter into excess at the expense of others and it is God how goes looking for the others. This is another uncomfortable challenge in our culture of excess. Where is God? The next line offers a clue.

Just a stranger on the bus, trying to make his way home.

Strangers on the bus can be very challenging. Last time I was on the bus home from a meeting in Harborne it felt like being on Question Time. Wearing a dog collar, of course, attracts all sorts of attention! But this line of the song points to God becoming a stranger. Jesus Christ came to this earth as a stranger, an exile of heaven come to show us a way home. That favourite Advent hymn puts it another way:

*O come, thou Key of David, come,
and open wide our heavenly home;
make safe the way that leads on high,
and close the path to misery.*

We believe that God's coming at Christmas is the story of one who enters right into the utter ordinariness of our lives - on the bus, on the sofa, doing the washing up, making up a guest room bed, preparing Christmas food, taking all those tablets that have been prescribed, visiting a hospital ward, buying gifts for children in another part of the world - this is the wonder and mystery of the incarnation of God. God comes as a stranger into life's ordinariness. Strangers are the most vulnerable of people who have no power and little control - just like a baby.

This Christmas we are called to welcome the stranger. St Hilda's is a place where many from our community will come to reach out to the touchstone of faith, hear and sing the old story in carols and bible readings. The priority of St Hilda's as a community of reconciliation is not to focus upon our own needs and expectations. But rather to shape our lives around the needs and expectations of the other, the non-member, the persons outside our context. The strangers. Trying to make their way home. Let each of us be committed to closing the path of misery and opening the way to Jesus, who comes to us. Rejoice, rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you.

I would like to end by saying how much Michaela, Joseph, Isobel and I are looking forward to our first Christmas with you. It seems less strange and more like home as time goes on.