

Going around homes with young families, I am often intrigued by the various steps that are taken to stop infants who have just started moving from getting into cupboards, heading upstairs, out of the door, getting burned by the cooker, fire or whatever. When our kids were young, we used a wooden playpen with bars – we used to call it ‘Benjamin’s Prison’. Once he was in there, he was safe from harm, the contents of our cupboards were safe and he wasn’t going anywhere.

At this time, we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. The image of the child in the manger, the picture of parents looking lovingly at their first born child, the thought of shepherds, of wise men from the East coming offering gifts, offering worship and adoration is one we have come to love. It features on our Christmas cards, in stained glass windows, in Nativity plays in our Churches. Don’t get me wrong, I am not criticising any of these as such, they are a lovely part of our celebration of Christmas.

The problem comes when we keep the Jesus whose birth we celebrate at this time confined to the scene on our Christmas cards, in our stained glass windows or the slightly self conscious child in our Nativity plays. The child was no ordinary child, and that child grew up.

Over this Christmas period we will be singing that lovely hymn ‘O come all ye faithful’ – it is a hymn that for me sums up the essence of Christmas as we proclaim in song

God of God,  
Light of Light,

.....  
very God,  
begotten, not created

And

Yea, Lord, we greet thee,

.....  
word of the Father,  
now in flesh appearing

We celebrate the birth of one who was different, different to the military Messiah that contemporary Judaism was expecting. We celebrate the birth of one who broke moulds, who defied the establishment of his day; one who welcomed people to his table that others shunned, the leper, the tax collector, the prostitute. We celebrate the birth of one who makes awkward, impractical demands on us - that we turn the other cheek, that we go the extra mile, that we share with those in need.

To go back to the playpen, that place where we seek to confine our children; confine them for their own safety, and on occasions confine them to make life easier for us to get on with other things that we want to do. I think we sometimes want to confine the Christ that the infant in the manger will grow up into. We like the child in the manger, the gentle Jesus, meek and mild but we are not so comfortable with the challenging, demanding Christ who wants to find his way into parts of our life that we would rather keep out of his reach.

In time, our children find their way out of the playpen, out of the cot and we will find them on the stairs, in the kitchen, in the places we don't always want them to be. Christ has a way of breaking out of the boundaries we set for him. The Christ we worship is here as we break bread, is here as we listen to his word, as we pray. But he is also out there in the world, in the refugee fleeing their homeland, he is with the homeless, the marginalised, the lonely, the difficult.

And he invites us to join him. He invites us to be his presence in this messy, untidy world he came to save.