

The Pro Cathedral of Holy Trinity Brussels

Christmas Eve

10pm December 24<sup>th</sup> 2011

**The Vulnerability of the Christmas Child**

It was a very unusual film. The idea behind it was bizarre. But I loved it. Brad Pitt and Cate Blanchett are great actors. And I guessed that the bizareness might just reveal something really profound.

The film was the Curious Case of Benjamin Button. Brad Pitt was Benjamin Button. And Benjamin Button was born old. When he was born he had the body of an 80 year old. As he got older in years his body got younger. When he died aged 80 he was a baby. Odd. But with the potential to be profound.

There came a moment in the film when Cate Blanchett said. We all start out wearing diapers and we all end up wearing diapers. And just in case you hadn't guessed the film was American.

We all start life wearing nappies and we all end life wearing nappies. The opening year and the ending years of our lives are often deeply vulnerable. We are unable to protect ourselves, unable to care for ourselves. We are dependent on the love and care of others and we are deeply vulnerable.

We spend our adult years trying to be the very opposite. We try to acquire qualifications , awards, professional standing and money to make ourselves strong. Some of us spend all of our time just trying to protect ourselves from the vulnerabilities of life. Some of us go even further, we try to build such powerful persona that we seem invincible.

But it is all an illusion. Even Presidents, Commissioners and MEPs are vulnerable human beings.

Just have a look at the person next to you. They may have a successful job or a good degree or a full bank account or a platinum credit card, but they are just as vulnerable are you are.

To be vulnerable is to be open to hurt, to be open to abuse, to be open to being used. To be vulnerable is to be open to receiving, to be open to sharing, to be open to being loved. That is how we were made. We were made to be vulnerable by a loving God who allows himself to be vulnerable to give and receive love.

I wonder if you have heard it said, I can't believe in a God of love who allows so much suffering in the world.

Polly Toynbee, Journalist and president, British Humanist Association wrote:

'The only time I am ever tempted, momentarily, to believe in a God is when I shake an angry fist at him for some monstrous suffering inflicted on the world for no reason whatever.'

Woody Allen put it more humorously, 'How do you expect me to believe in God, when only last week I got my tongue caught in the roller of my electric typewriter?'

Imagine that you were God for a day. What sort of God would you be? I would stop all the world's disasters. I would stop everyone from sinning. I would stop everyone from driving over the speed limit. I would stop everyone from drinking more than two glasses of wine.

I would stop everyone thinking bad thoughts even before they had thought them. You would find yourself on the edge of a bad thought, and before just before you did I would intervene and stop you.

I guess I wouldn't be a very loving God but I be in complete control. There would be no freedom to chose – no creativity – but the world would be very neat and tidy.

Many of us grow up with a picture of God somewhere between Father Christmas and a Magician with a magic wand. This is the sort of God that 14 year olds believe in. The sort of God we might remember when we need a problem fixed quickly. The 14 year old understanding of God works for 14 year olds. But when a 40 year old faces the problems of life....the God of their teenage years just does not meet the challenge.

The birth of Jesus at Christmas turns all of this completely upside down. In the Message version of the Bible we read: The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes the one-of-a kind glory, like Father, like Son.

In a way that we will never understand the baby born in Bethlehem was God taking human flesh and blood. The God who is greater than the universe, who is more powerful than we can conceive or imagine, allowed himself to be born as a baby in a manger in Bethlehem.

Not a legend, or a fairy story but a real baby born in a real place called Bethlehem.

How vulnerable is that? It is the ultimate vulnerability. Only death is as vulnerable as birth. The death of Jesus on the cross is the other ultimate moment of divine vulnerability.

On the cross we see a vulnerable God allowing himself to be abused by a sinful humanity. On the cross we see a vulnerable God expressing his love and forgiveness for the whole of creation. On the cross we see a vulnerable God inviting us to love him.

In the Christmas story God is entering in to our human experience and identifying with you and me in all our human vulnerability.

Whether we like it or not – to be truly human is to be vulnerable. When try to make ourselves invincible we are making ourselves less human. To be vulnerable is a good part of how we are – it is the beginning of loving, being loved and being fully alive. Sometimes when we are at our most vulnerable we are closest to the God who made us.

St Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians chapter 12 wrote ‘when I am weak I am strong’. What did he mean?

Jesus, in the sermon on the mount, said:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

Blessed are those you mourn, for they shall be comforted

Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled.

Sometimes we are most real, when we are most vulnerable, the God who allowed himself to be vulnerable blesses us in ways that we could never have imagined.

The Curious Tale of Benjamin Button was a bizarre film. And yet it was surprisingly profound. We all end up wearing diapers. Not just Americans. We are all vulnerable. To be fully human is to be vulnerable – to be open to loving – to be open to being loved.

The message of Christmas is that the God who allowed himself to be vulnerable reaches out to each one of us. He offers to stand alongside us in all our vulnerability, and invites us to experience his love, his grace and his truth. At the end of Matthew’s Gospel he promised his hearers ‘surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age’. Have a wonderful Christmas.

AMEN.