



# Embracing Humanity

BRF ADVENT BOOK

A journey towards becoming flesh

**Isabelle Hamley**

Foreword by the Archbishop of Canterbury

*Embracing Humanity*



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Isabelle Hamley



Ministries

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# Contents

Foreword .....	6
Introduction .....	8
Prologue .....	11
<i>Day 1</i>	
<b>1 The Word became flesh</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<i>Days 2–7</i>	
<b>2 He came into the world</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<i>Days 8–13</i>	
<b>3 Living the story</b> .....	<b>81</b>
<i>Days 14–17</i>	
<b>4 Embodying the promise</b> .....	<b>103</b>
<i>Days 18–24</i>	
Christmas Day .....	137
Suggestions for group study .....	141
Notes.....	146

# Foreword

Every year in Advent I find a greater sense of wonder at the idea of the Word made flesh. It just seems to be so extreme and risky. Babies are vulnerable, yet God becomes one. War zones are dangerous, especially for children, yet God chooses a war zone to be the place of his birth. Those in poverty have the highest rate of infant trauma, neonatal deaths and shortened lifespans. God is born into a poor family. Refugees combine the dangers of all the above, yet God is born in a place and time that creates enemies who force his family on to the road.

No sensible communications expert would say to the Word that this is how to get your message across. A baby in a manger sounds dramatic today, and centuries of more or less schmaltzy telling of the stories of Christmas have given us the impression that the world stopped its busy life and focused on a small and unimportant town called Bethlehem. But it did not. The Word became flesh, not with a shout of triumph but in a baby's whimper, unheard beyond a few feet. The Word lived in a small area and died with a cry unheard, again, beyond a few feet.

Yet now the world does more or less stop. As Isabelle Hamley writes about her childhood, even in an atheist family Christmas was an event; Christless certainly, but still an event, and not one called Yule or anything like that. The birth of Christ seems to stop the world in its most prosperous areas even more every year, in inverse proportion to the number of believers.

Isabelle has written a wonderful book of preparation for Christmas, a book to build excitement, open the eyes and relish the paradox of a God who loves us so much that he whispers his words of comfort and joy, heard only by those who listen. Her aim is to bring us face to

face with Christ, to go through Advent travelling towards Bethlehem, and to find out who our travelling companions are. We know some. We travel with the shepherds, the short distance from dark hillside to awed wonder. We travel with the magi, the long and puzzled journey to a point of enlightenment and then flight. But most of all we travel with each other.

This strange journey to a point of hope that changes the world is not made with chosen companions – or rather, not with companions chosen by us. It is a journey with those very unlike us, in culture and experience, in belief and outlook, except that we are going the same way. In Isabelle's beautiful and thoughtful writing, the barriers we put up against those too 'other', too unlike us, are dissolved over the weeks of Advent, so that the end of journeying is a destination that draws us before the face of God translated into human understanding, and a journey in which we discover one another better.

Two changes come when Advent is travelled well. We change our understanding of God, and we change our understanding of what it is to be part of the church, that vast number who follow Jesus Christ, the baby in Bethlehem.

*Justin Welby, Archbishop of Canterbury*





# Introduction

I grew up in a world without Christmas.

As a child in a virulently atheist family, going through the highly secular French education system, I simply did not hear the story of Christmas until I was a teenager. Of course, we had a tree and presents, and as an avid reader I came across rumours of Christmas in books, but nothing concrete or explicit. Christmas was just a cultural artefact, a time to get presents and endure distant relatives. Magic and wonder waned as soon as I stopped believing in Father Christmas (no mention of ‘Santa’ in my family, that would have been far too religious).

Watching my first nativity, age twelve, was a revelation. The sheer wonder of it still gives me goosebumps: the hard journey, the promise of a star, the extraordinary baby unrecognised while an indifferent world goes by. I still love nativities. In particular, I love school nativities. They’re a wonderful, chaotic, odd take on the Christmas story. Sometimes they are so chaotic it is actually difficult to recognise much of the Christmas story in there, in between unicorns, aliens and robots. I love them, because they tug on a familiar story – after all, even in the weirdest, most outlandish interpretations, you still have Mary, Joseph and Jesus, and the wonder of the birth. At the same time, they bring in so much else – all the strange, quirky aspects of our humanity, with joy and celebration that we can’t always explain, and the occasional bunfight between ox and donkey. School nativities are a cacophony of humanity. And this is the world, the people God has come to walk with, in their habits and cultures and choices, even the questionable ones.

Even when the message passes by those gathered, focused as they are on taking pictures of their own little cherubs dressed in makeshift

donkey costumes, nevertheless, in this echo of the story, there is something of God-with-us, still often unrecognised, but present nonetheless. There is still something of God coming into the reality of our lives, right in the midst of them, and taking shape in the particularities of where we are. Christmas points us to who God is, but it also points us towards what it means to be human and how God chooses to become one of us.

The 21st century is a strange time to be human. Today rumours are not of God made flesh, but of artificial intelligence, which may make many humans redundant. God became flesh, but human beings seem constantly eager to escape being flesh: we make disincarnated, disembodied 'intelligence', in our image. We try to flee our bodies in virtual reality, and modern medicine gives us ways to change the bodies we do not like or want and prolong life far beyond previously natural ends. What can the Christmas story tell us about who we are in this changing world? What does it mean for the Good News to be good news for the whole human person, rather than just minds or souls? Who are we called to be, as we walk with the God who walks with us?

To be a Christian is to believe that God, the creator of the universe, is beyond anything we can imagine or fathom. Yet it is also to believe that this God, who created us, stooped to earth and chose to become one of us. It is to believe that in God's eyes, our humanity is not something to transcend, but something to embrace.

This Advent, I invite you on a journey to explore humanity in the light of Jesus' coming. Each day, we will explore a different aspect of Jesus' humanity, of God's wholehearted embrace of the world he created. Humanity is not an easy thing to live with; we often struggle with our limitations, and the realities of a physical world we cannot ever fully control, and a human world of interactions that brings as much pain as it brings joy. And yet this is the existence that God chose and embraced. God brought salvation not by removing us from our humanity, but by entering it and inviting us into a journey of transformation within it.

Dwelling on the person of Jesus is an invitation for all of us to befriend our humanity, explore God's call to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and learn to live life in all its fullness – the life of humanity reconciled to God, to one another and, perhaps hardest of all, to itself.





## DAY 1

# Prologue

**The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.’**

LUKE 1:30–31

‘Do not be afraid.’ Four little words, and one of the most frequent commands given to human beings in the whole of scripture. The command always seems a little ironic: after all, God and angels only ever need to tell you to not be afraid when there is something frightening just round the corner! In the Bible the words ‘do not be afraid’ are, however, almost always accompanied by another set of words: ‘For I am with you.’ God tells us not to be afraid, not because there is nothing scary, nor because there is no danger or difficulty ahead, but because God is with us. God’s presence overshadows and overcomes whatever it is that we may be afraid of.

In Luke, the story of God’s journey towards embracing a human form begins with these words, ‘Do not be afraid.’ These are words that tell us much about being human: being human is a dangerous, risky business. Human beings are small creatures in an immense universe, subject to all kinds of forces, not least their own destructive impulses. But God says, ‘Do not be afraid.’ The angel’s first greeting was, ‘The Lord is with you!’ So the presence of God is already assured. But something new is happening. After the familiar words ‘do not be afraid’ comes the usual refrain, in unfamiliar form. It is another assurance of the

presence of God, but this time in strange, unexpected fashion: 'You will bear a son.' 'God is with you' now takes on a much more intimate, almost invasive meaning. God will be with Mary, and all humanity, in a completely different way. God is coming to 'be with' his creatures by sharing their humanity.

We often say that Jesus was fully human, and that therefore he experienced the whole range of human emotions. I wonder whether he was ever scared. I wonder what it would have been like, for the God of all immensity, the God who flung stars into space, in that instant, to be reduced to a newly implanted embryo – just a few cells, small, contained, unseeing, unhearing, completely dependent on the lifeblood of another.

We often think of the incarnation as Jesus being born. But God came to be with humanity in Jesus nine months or so earlier, as a foetus slowly growing within Mary. Nine months of being confined, surrounded, enclosed within Mary's humanity. Nine months of waiting and growing into humanity. Nine dangerous months, and an even more dangerous birth – infant and mother mortality was high in the ancient world.

God made flesh was risky business – for mother and baby alike. 'Do not be afraid' was quite clearly the right greeting. But God is with us. God embraced humanity and did not take any shortcuts, however much easier it would have been!

The long wait before Christmas matters – God is present with his people, but hidden, barely noticed and dismissed. Mary probably wouldn't have been believed; her pregnancy wouldn't have been noticed for a while, and once it was, villagers around her would not have discerned the presence of God. They would have seen a teenage girl, pregnant out of wedlock. The first person we are told who noticed the presence of God was another baby: John the Baptist leapt in Elizabeth's womb in recognition (Luke 1:44).

Human beings aren't very good at recognising God. That's a consistent thread in the story – they look in palaces and high places, among luxury and ease, when God is hidden in faraway, irrelevant, humbler places. What do we fail to notice today? Where is God at work, this Advent time, around us?

If God wanted to embrace humanity, to self-reveal in ways humans could understand, why not come in a more obvious way? God comes softly and quietly, and enters the common life of humanity, the ordinary and routine. God embraces the reality that to be human is to be one of many, to live a life marked by what is ordinary, and makes it extraordinary.

These weeks of Advent are a time to befriend the ordinary and look for signs of God within it, not simply looking ahead to Christmas, as if all that matters is the destination we want to reach. The journey matters; the waiting is important, but not because waiting is a good thing in and of itself. Waiting matters because it prevents us from missing out on where God is at work *on the way*. And it is those signs of God already at work that prepare us to welcome Christmas Day in its glorious fullness and not look for God in the wrong places.

It is easy to overfocus on the end of the journey, the great event, to such a degree that our life is lived in the future, without attending to the present. When my daughter was little, we started a little tradition. We put up the empty crib in the lounge on Advent Sunday, and then dispersed all the different actors of the nativity around the house. Shepherds and sheep in a field faraway (but near a window so they could see the angels come!); the wise men furthest away from the crib, on a long journey; Mary and Joseph waiting in Nazareth in the dining room; a star suspended from the highest place over the stairs. Every day, we moved the characters a little nearer the crib. We told stories of what the wise men saw on the way. We gathered lots of different sheep around the shepherds. We took Mary on a journey to see Elizabeth and back.

Ahead of Christmas, all these characters were already moving, listening, acting in ways that showed God at work in their lives and in the life of the world. Christmas was long in the making; it was not a one-day single event. The threads of humanity, in its wonderful diversity of cultures, backgrounds and people, were being gathered by God, brought together and knitted into the story of salvation. God-made-flesh, God-with-us, was already inviting all of humanity to come near, embracing the needs and hopes of the world, whispering softly, 'Do not be afraid, for I am with you.'

As you set out into Advent, you may want to commit yourself to noticing one way in which God is present within every day of the month ahead and write it down. What made you notice? Does a pattern emerge? How does it feel to consciously notice God at work?



*Immanuel, God-with-us,  
Help us, this Advent, to discern your presence  
in strange and unexpected places.  
May we see you in the face of the stranger.  
May we see you in the face of those we love.  
May we see you in the face of those who turn away from us.  
May we see you waiting at the side of the road.  
Help us make space in our lives and in our imaginations,  
so that the wonder of your presence  
would never cease to amaze us,  
and as we see our humanity  
reflected in your story,  
help us learn from you  
what it is to be fully human  
and made in your image.  
Amen.*

1

# The Word became flesh

**And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.**

JOHN 1:14

To be a Christian is to believe in God, who is beyond anything we can imagine, and yet also believe that this God, who created us, stooped to earth and chose to become flesh. 'Flesh' is a thick kind of word. It evokes something solid, real, something we can't ignore. It makes us look at bodies and how we think about and treat them. We don't often put 'flesh' and 'glory' in the same sentence, and yet this is what John does in the opening to his gospel. How do we understand this paradox, that flesh is so fragile and limited and yet can be the vehicle for God to reveal God's glory?





DAY 2

# Embodied

**He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.**

JOHN 1:10-14

'The Word became flesh.' How easy it is to read those words, on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, and forget to stop for the wonder of it. The Word became *flesh*. 'Flesh' is such a practical, grounded word. Not just 'body', not just 'human', but 'flesh'. The Oxford English Dictionary defines flesh as 'the soft substance consisting of muscle and fat that is found between the skin and bones of a human or an animal'. The word 'flesh' is precise, unemotional and down-to-earth. The Word, a concept, an idea, a possibility, now becomes solid, in the way that animals and humans are solid, as an interconnected web of tissue and bones that somehow enables life as we know it.

The sheer physicality of Jesus is something that gospel writers pick up on repeatedly: Jesus gets hungry and tired; he needs to rest; he has dusty feet and needs to wash. To use the word 'flesh' leaves us nowhere to go but to accept the unimaginable: that human bodies

are good enough, precious enough, for God to take shape within them, for concepts and ideas and ideals to be made real. This is quite extraordinary if we consider the history of the word 'flesh'. In much traditional discourse, flesh has had negative connotations. It has often been used to refer to bodily appetites and desires, usually in a negative way, opposed to the ways of the Spirit.

Scripture itself is more nuanced when it comes to talking about flesh. Flesh has a long history in the Bible. Right at the beginning, in Genesis 2, God takes out a rib and closes the human creature's flesh. And out of this flesh, another human being is made, which the first human recognises as 'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' (Genesis 2:23). From then on, every human being is born, made, of the flesh of another. This very early story affirms how interconnected human beings are, and 'flesh' symbolises the deeper bonds between them. This long line of connected material bodies stretches across centuries and generations, between the very beginning and the coming of the 'Word made flesh': the genealogy of Jesus traces the origins of this flesh both through human connectedness and through the word of God.

Flesh is the material of human existence, and within it lies both dust and glory, curse and blessing, the image of God and the reality of sin. It is within human bodies and bodily existence that both the power of sin and the power of the Spirit are at work, as Paul states in Romans 7. The stories of Old and New Testament speak of the ways in which human beings move away from the 'good' of their creation and seek ways of destruction: they abuse one another's bodies; they abuse creation around them; they organise their lives in ways that cause some to have more than they need, while others' bodies are left to starve. It is within these complex, embodied relationships that sin and brokenness take root.

But it is also where salvation comes and transforms. God works with his people to transform the way they live, the way they relate, the way they value one another and creation. The laws of the Old Testament, as well as the prophets, explore ways of living that care for justice, peace

and prosperity. In the New Testament, the ministry of Jesus does not distinguish between body and soul; the Good News is good news for the whole person. Hungry, sick, despised bodies in the ministry of Jesus are seen, touched and restored to dignity. Bodies will be restored and transformed in the resurrection of the dead, too; bodies are not left behind for a better, more lofty reality. The resurrection that is promised is a *bodily* resurrection.

We often struggle with this concept. For a long time, western cultures have assumed a dualism, the idea that we have a body and a soul and that what really matters is the soul. But that could not be further from the picture of scripture. In Hebrew, you don't *have* a body; you *are* a body. To be human is to be this strange, complex mix of thoughts, feelings and flesh. The body is not something we can use for the sake of our 'real selves' or our inner sense of who we are, or that can be used by others independently of our sense of being. Our bodies are an intrinsic part of who we are, and what we do with them and to them matters for the whole person. This, then, is why so much of scripture is concerned with matters of justice, of social relationships and of greed, lust and violence – because the whole human person is affected.

And so, conversely, salvation is for the whole person. The sign of the promise at work, given to Abraham with circumcision, is a sign given in the body. Promises of renewal are clearly embodied: God promises to replace 'hearts of stone' with 'hearts of flesh' in Ezekiel 36:26, where flesh represents humanity as it should be: vibrant, faithful and loving. In Ezekiel 37, the image of sin works itself out in the 'valley of dry bones', where human beings lose their humanity entirely, but God acts in salvation by putting flesh back on bones. Later, the prophet Joel prophesies the coming of the Spirit 'on all flesh' (2:28).

In the New Testament, the word 'flesh' is sometimes used negatively. Paul, for example, talks of 'flesh' following its own desire as opposed to the spirit following Christ. But this is not about human beings as split in two between body and spirit; rather, it is a contrast between two ways of living, two ways of understanding – one rooted purely in

what can be seen, in the material, and one rooted in relation to God and what cannot necessarily be seen. In these passages, ‘flesh’ represents a world that has separated itself from God, that has limited itself – that has reduced itself to flesh, rather than the whole person.

In contrast, salvation is symbolised by the bread of life, Jesus giving himself: ‘The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh... Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you’ (John 6:51, 53). Jesus’ words are pretty stark, even disturbing! This is a deeply material, embodied picture of salvation. It is the Word made flesh that changes the story and renews the whole person. And when the person is transformed, we see salvation at work in their body just as we saw sin at work in their body: through transformed lives, not just through spiritual illumination.

Everything in the story of God says something that our culture somehow struggles to understand: bodies matter to God; bodies are not despised, they are precious; bodies are not just instruments to be used, moulded or exploited, they matter in and of themselves; bodies are not irrelevant, they are the place of salvation.

## For reflection

- I wonder how you feel about being embodied. As Jim Cotter says, you are ‘not a no-body, nor just any-body. You are some-body’.<sup>1</sup> What does this mean for you today, that your body, the whole of you, is precious to God?
- You may want to spend some time giving thanks for your body – for its amazing intricacy; for the way it connects you to other human beings; for the way in which it makes you, you.
- And you may want to bring before God all the things that you struggle with when it comes to being embodied.



*God-made-flesh,  
we often struggle with our bodies,  
with pain, with tiredness, with hunger;  
we struggle with what we see in the mirror;  
we struggle with what we do and what is done to our bodies.  
Help us hold our bodies  
with the care and love that you took as you designed them,  
fearfully and wonderfully made.  
Help us cherish the body of others  
and care for their well-being  
with gentleness, generosity and justice.  
In the name of Jesus, the Word made flesh.  
Amen.*



# Seeing humanity in a new light

God became flesh at Christmas. But how does God, who created all things, live within the limitations of humanity – limitations that humanity itself often resents and tries to transcend? And what does it truly mean to be human?

As contemporary society grapples with questions of identity, justice and medical ethics, *Embracing Humanity* deftly explores how different aspects of being human are both inhabited and transformed in the incarnation.

Through the lens of Advent and Christmas, Isabelle Hamley guides us through daily reflections and prayers, encouraging us to meditate on being human in the light of God's choice to reach out to us in Jesus.



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