

We are now fast approaching the celebration of the core mysteries of our faith – in Holy Week we remember the passion and death of Jesus followed on Easter Sunday by his astonishing resurrection. So this is a good time for us to think about the big picture – what it’s all about. I’m going to be doing that in my sermons on the Sundays of Lent.

As we approach this it’s helpful to remember that no-one really knows what is in God’s mind. We have glimpses. We have the writings of the early church and the ways that those have been interpreted through the ages, but we don’t know for sure. That’s difficult for us because we want certainty, we want to know what it’s all about. And indeed many theologians have written systematic theologies that try to put it all together, and many preachers preach as though we have connected all the dots and they only make one picture.

But in fact there are several ways of connecting the dots. The picture I’m going to suggest to you this morning will probably differ in significant ways from what you think you know. Which makes it especially slippery. It’s hard to grasp concepts which are new. Research has shown that we prefer to interpret information according to what we think we know, rather than re-interpret what we know in the light of new information. But please bear with me.

I am going to suggest that having the Christ incarnate in Jesus was not God’s plan B but was actually plan A, intended from the very beginning of the creation of the cosmos.

You have probably heard that it was because humanity was sinful and had failed again and again to listen to the words of the prophets, that God decided the only thing left to do was to send his Son to die for our sins. In other words, the incarnation was plan B when plan A failed.

Presumably plan A in this scenario was that we would turn towards God without Jesus, or perhaps that we would never sin. I'm not actually sure.

But more and more theologians are suggesting that it was the plan from the very beginning that God would incarnate as human. One of these theologians, Jurgen Moltman, a German in the reformed tradition, argues that being made in the image of God was both our destiny and our promise, a promise which was fulfilled in Jesus. When God incarnated in Jesus, he showed us what it truly meant to be human in the image of God and as each of us enrolls in the reign of God we become sisters and brothers of Jesus, the first-born sibling, and in so doing we are restored or perhaps newly created in the image of God.

Perhaps this is the true meaning of the atonement, of our becoming one with God; that we are finally given the promise and made in the image of God.

If it is true that from the very beginning of creation God intended to incarnate and take on the limitations and difficulties of life as human being, then it implies that even if there were no sin, even if human society was not based in violence, the Christ would still have come in Jesus to dwell among us. How very different that would have been... we would have listened to his teachings, let go of the old ways and embraced the new religion of freedom and compassion, and Jesus would probably have lived to be a very old man.

But what we know is that humanity is flawed. We are not creatures just of light and love, but we sin individually and our society is full of systematic sin – exploitation, oppression, racism, violence – all those things that we can call the sin matrix. We are born into a society where sin is rampant and its almost impossible to get up in the morning without

doing or using something which either oppresses another or adds to the global ecological crisis.

And so Jesus did not live to be a very old man.

He was brutally killed because the message he brought, both in his teachings and in his actions, was so threatening to those who benefitted from the sin matrix that they had to get rid of him. They had to get rid of this threat, just as we had to get rid of Ghandi and Martin Luther King Jr. They threatened the powers of the sin matrix.

And let us be clear about this, the sin matrix is not just outside us, the sin matrix is also within us, because we have lived as part of it from the moment of conception. So perhaps this is the true “original sin” – the sin that we inherit, the sin that we inhabit and which invades our hearts. Part of the work of the Holy Spirit is to help us to change our hearts and minds so that we are no longer unconsciously swept along but are able to make new decisions, new choices. As we do the slow, hard work of disarming our own hearts, laying down our judgements and our anger, opening to others who are different from us, others who may hurt us so we are separating from the sin matrix, so we are being reborn in the image of God.

And as we do that, we will be challenged again and again to change our lives so that we become part of the new and coming reign of God. It’s not easy because most of us are privileged by the structures of our society. Yes we are also oppressed in some ways but for most of us the privileges outweigh the oppressions. And it is very, very hard to let go of privilege.

Jesus was crucified not in order to appease an angry God but because he threatened the systems of privilege; he threatened the sin matrix; he

preached and lived non-violence. God did not kill Jesus, God did not need Jesus to die, but humankind did.

The very nature of God is infinite love and creativity. John's gospel tells us that "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life." It was because of God's love that God became flesh and blood in Jesus. It was because of that love manifest in Jesus that he followed his own destiny even though it led to excruciating pain and death. God's very nature is to be loving, relational and creative – she cannot be otherwise.

And the universe is the natural progression of the nature of God. God's loving relational creativity is manifest in creation. The universe is not God's hobby, something that he does for enjoyment like making toy airplanes, no it is the very substance of God's being. God is present in every star, in every grain of sand, in every ant.

But God is present in a very special way in those who have heard his call to be the Body of Christ, in those who continue his incarnation in humanity, in those who are the sister and brothers of Christ. And that, my friends, is who we are.

God with flesh on.