

I had a very painful discussion last week. It was about the palm trees at the front of the church on the patio. They're all infected with the dreaded palm weevil, and you'll know that once you see evidence of the weevil, it's over. They're all goners. So, we were talking about how and when to remove the trees. It's ironic that the greenest and healthiest tree at the moment on our patio is the Christmas tree that's already been chopped down. Losing the palms will be very, very sad. They've been there since the original St. James was built 117 years ago, which I know in California years is a very, very long time, almost prehistoric.

It's painful because the church will look different without those majestic palm trees swaying gently in front of it. And most of us don't like change. And I think that's especially true of the Christmas season. I learnt very early on in my ministry never to change anything about any of the Christmas services unless I absolutely had to. In my early years, I changed the time of a Christmas Eve service and there was a whole stream of parishioners knocking at my door saying, "But we always come to that service at that time." My daughter's very upset with me at the moment because when we were at home in England, I would always insist on the Christmas tree going up as late as possible. Christmas Eve was my preferred option, but we'd always been negotiated back to middle of December. But since I've been in America, I've thought what a lovely tradition it is to decorate the Christmas tree the day after Thanksgiving. So, my daughter's very annoyed because she points out that that's often in November.

None of us like change at Christmas. And this too is ironic as what we celebrate at Christmas is the greatest change that ever happened in history. So much so that we actually mark history by CE and BCE, before the common era or the common era, reflecting that the Christian calendar begins with the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem all those years ago. And it's very important in the Christian tradition that this story that we remember tonight is rooted in history. Whatever was going on with Jesus's birth, it's understood in the Christian tradition as something that not only changed history, but something rooted in history. It happened in history. So, when Luke tells the Christmas story, he begins by saying, "A decree went out from Emperor Augustus when all the world

should be registered. And this was the first registration that took place when Quirinus was governor of Syria."

What we celebrate at Christmas is that God has acted in human history and that this action has changed history. What has changed because of Christmas, you might ask? Well, God has made himself known. The word has become flesh, the gospel reminds us. The God who created the universe has come amongst us in a form that we can recognize. He lived a life in the person of Jesus, which is the same as ours. As the writer to the Hebrews said, "Jesus became like his brothers and sisters in every respect." The truly amazing thing about Christmas is that God, the Lord of the universe, reveals himself in the form of a human baby, a vulnerable baby.

As the hymn writer said, "Veiled in flesh, the godhead see." God has made himself known. And because of this baby, because of the person of Jesus Christ, we can now know God. I've recently enjoyed reading a book by a journalist called Sebastian Junger called *In My Time of Dying*, which I'm sure other people here have read. It's in the Top 10 bestseller list. And in this book, Junger describes a near-death experience, and he tries to make sense of it, and he's an atheist and a rationalist. So, it is not easy for him to do this. He can't fit his experience into his understanding of the world. His near-death experience convinces him that our material world is not all that there is.

But he struggles to understand how to name that spiritual realm or whatever it is that exists beyond the material. He's had a taste of it, but he can't say anything about it. So, he says things like "death is not a final severing, but an ultimate merging". But I'm not clear what he thinks he's being merged with. Since that first Christmas, we know something of that spiritual realm that exists beyond our material world because God has come in Christ to reveal himself, to tell us something of what it is that lies beyond. We'll never all understand everything. Our comprehension will be always limited, but we can recognize in that baby lying in a manger that God has come amongst us. God is reaching out to us with a call, an invitation to get to know Him. So, let's remember, this Christmas season, which in some ways seems so impervious to change, marks the biggest change of all. Amen.