Among the more obvious features of splendid gothic buildings like this are the vertical lines and the pointed arches that draw our eyes, our minds and our hearts to the heavens. At Christmas, buildings like ours can transport us to the fields where we stand with the shepherds staring at the sight and sound of the singing angels, or spirit us off to more distant lands to be with the magi as they study the mysterious star.

And yet the spiritual direction of the Christian faith is not primarily to reach for the skies but to bend to the ground. 'He came down to earth from heaven', we rightly sing, 'with the poor and mean and lowly, lived on earth our saviour holy'. Or as St Paul put it, 'Christ Jesus … though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness’ (Philippians 2.6&7). Or as John's gospel puts it, 'the word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1.14).

But why? To quote the title of a famous theological book written just over a thousand years ago, ‘why did God become human?’

The author of that eleventh century text made the argument that God couldn’t, wouldn’t and shouldn’t do what God wanted and needed to do for sinful humanity except by becoming human and suffering and dying for our sins. It was an argument that turned on what is just.
There’s another way of approaching the question that I want to suggest today – and that is one that turns on the nature of love. And I’d like to get into this by floating some questions about our human experience of love. For instance: 'why do people actually visit people they really love rather than content themselves with a Christmas card or text message?' Or this, ‘why do we feel such a deep yearning if we find ourselves a long way away from someone we really love at Christmas - even if we can speak on the phone?'

God became human, the word became flesh, and Jesus Christ embraced humility because, in the end, words alone fail. St Paul wrote as much in his most famous letter: ‘as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end’ (1 Corinthians 13.8). There is some irony here because these are words about the limited value of words; and, as we know, Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians was not a huge success, which is why he wrote them a second letter. But even for Paul, the most famous letter-writer in history, writing a letter was a poor substitute for making a visit.

We read a lot of words in our daily life in this College. We read them in ancient archives and endless emails, in committee papers and academic articles, in first year essays and PhD theses – and from time to time some us still manage to read and write books. These all have their place. But few texts, few documents, can inspire us to wonder or to joy, and all are strained to the limit when we seek to use them to convey our loving purposes.

Poetry, and in particular, poetry set to music, can take us further - can connect with our hearts and souls. But when you are in trouble, deep trouble, there is nothing more
heartwarming, nothing more healing or restoring, than the company of a person who is happy to let speech fall away and simply be with you in attentive, caring, loving silence.

Why did God become human? You could say that it was because God became tired of writing laws that were regularly broken and sending messages via prophets who were routinely ignored. But that’s a less than adequate way of putting it, because it fails to see that, fundamentally, Christianity is not a 'do this', 'do that', 'don't do the other' kind of religion. Christianity is a religion of the loving purposes of God, and these are most profoundly expressed in story and poetry, music and art – forms that inspire people to wonder and joy and which lead people to live lives of practical compassion in which actions, words and silence all have their place.

The loving purposes of God are not, as they say, just for Christmas. They are, and this is the Christian gospel, the only force that can deal with the overwhelming evidence of evil that we have been assailed with through the media in recent weeks. I mean both the manifest evils of brutality and cruelty, and the hidden evils of corruption that lie behind so much poverty and destitution across the world. I mean, as well, the evil of ‘religion’ designed to meet the all-too-human desire to be certain about things that we can't be certain about, or to control the things we have no right or reason to control. All these things, and many more, are connected and entangled in the web of sin from which only God in Christ can free us.

The question of how we respond to evil must have crossed all our minds in recent weeks; not least as we sat through yet another distressing news bulletin. The answer that has been suggesting itself to me is that, come what may, we must
become ever more attuned to the loving purposes of God. Faced with evil, we need to eschew the easy responses of revenge or despair, and open ourselves to the faithful possibility that the love of God can transform even … well, even Aleppo, even Yemen, even the fear that comes when we dwell on the actions of ruthless terrorists, or the heartache that follows when we imagine what it might be like to be risking everything in an overcrowded and leaky boat somewhere on the Mediterranean.

The love of God, the loving purposes of God, the silent compassion of God – these are the only answers we can give to life’s toughest questions, because they are the only answers worthy of the depth of suffering that some of our brothers and sisters are experiencing - even now.

And it is our duty and our joy, not only to wonder at this divine yet down-to-earth love, but to engage with it; to embrace it and to love it back, trusting that the way of love is not just one of today’s vaguer life-style options, but is, in fact, the way of Christ. We glimpse it in the glory of this beautiful festival, but know it most profoundly when we ourselves, with such humility as we can manage, let the love and compassion that God has planted in our hearts become our guiding light and our most profound gift to others.

As we today celebrate God’s self-offering to us in Jesus Christ, let us ask for the grace that we might make a gift of our own lives by embracing wholeheartedly the loving purposes of God. And, trusting in those purposes, may we know once again the peace that passeth all understanding and the joy that lights the heavens.

Stephen Cherry