

‘I come from Des Moines, somebody had to.’

Don’t you just love Bill Bryson!

Recently I’ve been reading his book,

The Body – a Guide for Occupants.

‘Your package containing the body has been despatched
and will be with you by 9 pm tonight,’

Amazon messaged,

scaring the living daylights out of me!

Whatever, one among many of Bill’s startling facts is
that there are over 8000 things that can kill you.

The miracle of life

is that you avoid every single one of them:

except one.

As Bill concludes:

‘For most of us, that’s not a bad deal.’

If there are over 8000 ways to die,
there must be over 8000 ways to live.
And we sleep-walk through life
and avoid every one of them
until tonight, this most holy night,
when for once we wake up and realise
'This is the one.'

This is life, true life, life in all its fullness.

A teenage mother,
giving birth in a cattle shed
in foreign climes
in dire poverty.

No advanced maternity care,
not even basic maternity care,
nothing.

But then she holds in her hands her greatest treasure,
the world's greatest treasure
and artists have been painting
this Madonna and her child ever since.

This is the life.

The pain, the ear-splitting screams,
the blood, the body broken in two...

But then the look

as she holds her baby to her breast

for the first time ever,

positively radiant, positively beatific.

I don't know what spin doctor

the Early Church hired to get its message across,

but having a mother and baby as the star of our show

was nothing short of divine.

Mary's got talent.

But no Simon Cowell:

just shepherds.

No bright TV lights:

just angels.

No rave reviews in the tabloids or on the blogs;

just Matthew and Luke's Gospel.

No adulating crowds:

just three magi crossing the very earth to bring their gifts,

as we humbly bring our gifts this most holy night.

This is the life.

A carpenter called Joseph.

Unlikely he was the actual father.

Had they done a paternity test

the results would have been mind-blowing.

Yet he showed the fiercest fatherly protection
for his beloved and her child,
snatching them away
and fleeing to safe places
when murderous kings stalked the earth.

The best of fathers.

This is the life.

The life unfolds.

The baby grows into an adult,
an annoying habit all babies have.

Blessed are the poor.

He walks that talk.

Feeding the poor with bread and wine,
partying with them,
healing them.

Blessed are those who mourn,
for he will raise up their dead.

All the nothings, all the little people,
all the nobodies, all those cast out by the world
are cast in by him.

This is the life.

And this is the death.

‘Father, forgive them,
for they don’t know what they’re doing.’

‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.’

‘Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom,’
pleads the convicted terrorist,
crucified beside him.

‘Today you will be with me in paradise,’
he promises.

Speaking not just to him,

but to us all.

This is the life.

This is the death.

This is the resurrection.

We've sung a lot of carols tonight,

starting with Hark the Herald by Charles Wesley.

His very last hymn he wrote aged 81 on his death bed:

In age and feebleness extreme,

Who shall a helpless worm redeem?

Jesus, my only hope Thou art,

Strength of my failing flesh and heart:

O could I catch one smile from Thee,

And drop into eternity!

Who can forget a baby's first smile?

This most holy night

the little Lord Jesus

smiles across two thousand years at you.

beckoning you to drop with him into eternity

'You see,'

Jesus says, taking his cue from Bill Bryson,

'I come from heaven. Somebody had to!'