I was watching Michael McIntyre the other night. He’s a comedian – pretty well known, although it is just possible some of you here may not have come across him, so please take my word for it. The show I was watching included what he described as his favourite joke: being a tennis umpire has to be the easiest job on earth. Any toddler could do it. They just sit in a high chair and shout ‘juice’.

The thing about comedians is that they tell it how it is: as they describe the world, we find ourselves saying, ‘yes, that’s exactly how it is’ – and we are able to recognise truth, and to laugh at it, and how ridiculous it all is. Sometimes that can really help, because comedy names things we are sometimes afraid to name. I was on the staff of a theological college some years ago where attendance at Morning Prayer was mandatory. One student, Pat, consistently flouted authority by staying away, causing consternation and anxiety amongst staff and students alike – like having someone who didn’t abide by the rules of queuing, we didn’t quite know what to do. At Christmas, in the student review, the sketches were interspersed with riffs on staff and students as characters from Children’s TV – and someone came on and sang, “Postman Pat, Postman Pat, Postman Pat and his black and white cat: early in the morning, chapel is so boring, I’m not going to go and that is that!” The place nearly exploded as we recognised truth, and community was formed as it was named and we were able to laugh at it.

We were in it together – it was a shared moment. Too many of the messages we hear in the media feel as though we are being preached at – perhaps the definition of a ‘preacher’ is that they are not like us, they don’t know us, or share our experience. Many people think that’s true of politicians – and some would say that it’s a reaction against that led to the world of Trump and Brexit, if I can risk putting those two together. This is dangerous territory for me standing high up in this pulpit, of course. There are terrible dangers of seeking to speak from above, or outside, into matters of life importance, especially for those who already feel excluded.

Jesus had a message, a gospel – a way of describing genuine good news. His message was that God was on the side of the poor, the sidetracked, the downtrodden. It was about the promise of hope, and the possibility of repentance – no one was excluded. For such an important message, he needed to really share the life, the experience, the outlook and perspective of the people to whom he was speaking. Such an important message: in truth, the most important ever to be shared, a message of love, and invitation into community for everyone, could not risk being undermined by someone in the crowd saying, “but he’s not like us ... he’s not one of us.”

Our Creator God wants humanity to understand and receive his love more than anything else. The story of the Bible is of God trying that get that message across, and the efforts of women and men to respond, often very selectively and the cost of others. The story of Christmas which we celebrate amidst this beauty tonight is the crux of the story, the turning point – like any good drama, it has a stage when it starts to go incredibly right when God’s son, Jesus, is born into the world to finally bring the message home. Later, of course, and like all great stories, it seems it is all going terribly wrong in the events leading up to the cross and Good Friday, but resolution comes in the joyful and totally unexpected surprise of resurrection. Nothing is more important than this story.

It is a story of a life lived with us, a life shared with us, a life when Jesus spoke in parables to those who understood what he was talking about when he poked fun at shepherds, or directed anger at authorities, political or religious. And ultimately life which Jesus then invites us to share with him. The flip side of the response ‘He’s not like us’ is the idea of our being invited into the place of privilege and power, where we may say in awe and wonder, looking
around ... ‘I don’t belong here’. But you do, we do: the promise of heaven, the invitation to an eternal community of love which Jesus was born to share is as real as the earth beneath your feet.

Jesus, in a way, is a comedian. He tells it slant, he shows us love, he invites us to a community where we don’t take ourselves too seriously – and he offers us hope. Hope to share. Hope because he became like us, so that we could be like him.