"BORN TO DIE"
Matthew 1:21

When wise old football coaches look at some young players, they can say instinctively, *"He's a born winger"*. We talk of young princes who are *"Born to be king"* and of others who are *"born leaders"*. In the world of entertainment the phrase *"a star is born"* has become almost a cliché. Bruce Springsteen's greatest and best-remembered song is *"Born to run"*. All of us have the idea that we're born for some purpose.

As we continue our journey through Advent, continue waiting for Christmas Day, our celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, we remember that Jesus too had a destiny – he was *"born to die"*, a destiny which he freely chose. There was really no other ultimate purpose in his coming into this world in the form and with the nature of a human being. I have several favourite Christmas poems, but two in particular link Christmas to the Eucharist. One is a jolly, nostalgic view of Christmas by John Betjeman, which I often read because it is uplifting and speaks of the truth at the heart of Christmas: *God was man in Palestine and lives today in bread and wine."* The other is a rather gloomy poem by a rather gloomy old poet, R S Thomas. It's called *Hill Christmas*, set in the bleak winter landscape of the Lleyn Peninsula in North Wales.

> *They came over the snow to the bread's*
> *purer snow, fumbled it in their huge*
> *hands, put their lips to it*
> *like beasts, stared into the dark chalice*
> *where the wine shone, felt it sharp*
> *on their tongue, shivered as at a sin*
> *remembered, and heard love cry*
> *momentarily in their heart's manger.*
>
> *They rose and went back to their poor*
> *holdings, naked in the bleak light*
> *of December. Their horizon contracted*
> *to the one small, stone-riddled field*
> *with its tree, where the weather was nailing*
> *the appalled body that had asked to be born.*
>
> (from *Laboratories of the Spirit* 1975)

Jesus *"had asked to be born",* so that he could then die for us. As part of the Christmas story we have just heard about the message that came to Joseph to prepare him for the birth of his fiancée's son, and Joseph, whose responsibility it would be to name the child, is told that he is to be called *"Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."* And that is then taken up in the words we read in Paul's *Letter to the Philippians* (*Philippians 2:5-11*).

> *In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:*
> *who, being in very nature*[a] *God,*
> *did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;*

rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature[b] of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death –
even death on a cross!
Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

The shepherds who were sitting around in the fields outside Bethlehem witnessed that amazing sight of the angels filling the skies with the message that *"Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born."* The coming of Jesus was hailed by everyone as the advent of the Saviour. Even Simeon, the old saint in the Temple, cried out in relief as he held the little week-old baby in his arms, *"My eyes have seen your salvation"*.

That was Jesus' destiny: he came to save. The message was repeated throughout his life as he explained to crowds and to individuals – as we have his words to Zacchaeus recorded by Luke – *"The Son of Man is come to seek and to save the lost"*. It was his ultimate goal: he set his face towards Jerusalem and all that it was to mean for him. He came to save from illness, from oppression (such as the appalling wall that Israel has built around his birthplace), from poverty, from the effects and consequences of sin. Isn't that what he said as he began his public ministry in Nazareth by reading from the prophecy of Isaiah?

But he could only accomplish that mission through his death: he was to become Saviour of the world through being executed on the cross at Golgotha. There are plenty of stories of those who have given their lives to save others, but only Jesus could give his live to save everyone who wanted to be saved. In *Hebrews 9:22-28* we read an explanation of this saving act of Jesus:

In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.
It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

Only a sacrifice could ensure that all men and women could have the opportunity of a renewed relationship with God that would mean the effects and consequences of sin would be annulled.

Jesus was a born a baby in Bethlehem. He grew up and became a man who did amazing things and taught amazing truths that have inspired people through the centuries, but his mission was only fully accomplished through death. That's why, even as we celebrate his birth, we remember with gratitude his death. In a few days' time we will be eating, drinking, playing games, opening presents, having all kinds of fun – but we start by reminding ourselves of what it's really all about. The Saviour of the world, in a stable two thousand years ago, was born to die. Let's give God thanks for that above everything else this Christmas – and every Christmas!