

Friends

At the Stanley Spencer Gallery this week, we were looking at the picture entitled "Consider the Lilies." In it, Christ is kneeling down, looking with immense concentration at some daisies, his hands on the ground almost embracing the patch of earth and plants that he is looking at. Spencer painted it in the style of an earlier work where he had observed his daughter as a toddler examining the garden with similar concentration, interest, and love.

We could of course see this imagery as quite frightening. The idea that a large and powerful toddler is paying acute attention to us and might at any moment decide that they were no longer interested, or that it would be amusing to squash, pick, or stamp on us is an awful thought, and it is how the Greeks saw their pantheon of gods who interfered in or ignored the lives of the world's people on a whim.

The God of the Christians is very different. Wanting to fully understand humanity, he came down to live among us, not to take, to play or to despoil, but to give. He fed, healed, restored and ultimately died for our salvation - the long-term healing of our souls - in an act that prepared us for eternity. As the last verse of "Away in a manger" says "bless all the dear children in thy tender care, and fit us for heaven, to live with thee there." The long-term healing of our souls is indeed what prepares us for heaven.

You may feel it is slightly odd of me to be speaking in terms of Christmas carols in these weeks where we are rapidly moving through Lent to Easter. But we would not have Easter had we not had Christmas, and Christmas would not have mattered if we had not had Easter - the two are inextricably linked. This week too, we have Mothering Sunday, a day when those in service returned to their Mother Church before going back to the families they worked for. It is perhaps an appropriate time to be thinking of Mary, the archetypal mother.

There is something wonderfully comforting about Stanley Spencer's picture. Something that suggests that God intimately knows and cares for us, keeping us safe from

anything that might come galloping across the lawn, loving us and wanting to understand us better, as we want to understand him. May this Lent continue to strengthen that desire in you.

God bless, Vicci