Here is an excellent question that I was recently asked by a new Christian: “Why do you no longer kneel in church?” There are days when I think that the simple answer to this is, “Because we are getting a bit old and the knees aren’t what they were!” I guess we hope that the merciful God is very understanding about the state of our poor old knees: indeed, on the Day of Judgement I wonder whether it might even be possible to suggest a design fault in that particular joint. But be that as it may, the honest truth is that, old or young, we don’t generally kneel in church these days.

The Bible’s description of worship tells us, however, that it is God who is seated, while the angelic hosts, cherubim and seraphim, angels and archangels, stand in God’s presence, presenting the attributes of worship in musical instruments, singing, incense, light, and candles. So standing before God is the Biblical and traditional Christian expectation of how we worship.

What then of kneeling?

This is a particularly beautiful way of using the body to discover your identity and your destiny. And to see how this works, you need go no further than the painting of the Nativity by Piero della Francesca in the National Gallery, which has just been restored and has a wonderful online introduction.

The Virgin Mary is the central figure in this painting and she is kneeling. She is clothed in blue, the symbolic colour of heaven, and on her blue mantle, spread out on the ground in front of her, lies the new-born Christ child. Mary’s hands are joined together in prayer, as she gazes at the baby. Jesus holds out his hands to express the human need for warmth, protection and food. But there is also a suggestion here of the divine invitation and welcome to all humanity, calling out faith in the miracle of God made visible in time and place and human flesh. You kneel when you discover how much God already loves you.

Mary shows us something about our place in God’s creation as we meet Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who has taken flesh in her womb. She kneels on bare earth in which nothing grows – a graphic reference in our own time of environmental damage. But the earth on which the Christ child lies has already sprung to life. Close too, you can see the immense detail in which Piero has drawn tiny plants, a reminder that the birth of Jesus begins a new era of hope in human history, symbolised by the wilderness becoming a fertile, living place.

The circle of earth around Jesus is coming to life in an array of tiny plants. It might also suggest the rounded apse that is the traditional shape of the sanctuary, where the altar is located in the earliest Christian churches. That suggestion is strengthened by the presence of a choir of 5 angels within this sacred space. (There are three instrumentalist and two singers: the singers are more sumptuously robed, suggesting they are more important, but we wouldn’t want our musicians to take this too seriously!)

In the background we see the ox, whose head is bowed low, in adoration of the miraculous birth, it seems. And obscured by the angels, we can just see the head of the ass, its mouth open in what appears to be an animal contribution to the heavenly music.

Perhaps that gently puts the singers in their place, but it is also part of an ancient convention that the sounds of the animal world are orientated towards giving praise to God. This finds beautiful expression in the stained glass window of the nativity by John Piper, in St Mary’s, church, Iffley, on the edge of Oxford. It illustrates an imaginary Latin conversation between various animals that goes like this:

Rooster: *Christus natus est* (Christ is born)

Goose: *Quando*? *Quando*? (When? When?)

Crow: *In hac nocte* (On this night)

Owl: *Ubi? Ubi?* (Where? Where?)

Lamb: *Bethlem, Bethlem*!

You kneel when you discover you are a priestly steward of the beautiful mystery of creation

In Piero’s *Nativity*, Mary hears the angelic choir that inspires a new song of harmony within creation. She listens and is attentive to Jesus Christ, the prince of Peace, who inspires this outbreaking of harmony. He lies on her mantle in the place where the altar would be in the sanctuary of a church. Directly behind the child, you can just see a goldfinch, perched on the top of a miniature tree in tiny detail. By convention, this little bird represents knowledge of the forthcoming passion of Christ and death on the cross. And, as if to underline this whisper of the shedding of blood, we see just the edge of a blood red tunic, the symbol of flesh and blood, beneath the aethereal blue of Mary’s outer garments.

The trajectory of Mary’s life enables Piero to present her as the woman of faith who gives flesh, love and obedience to the unseen God, offering the world to Jesus in order that by his cross he might redeem is hurts and direct its future to the attainment of the beauty and perfection that is our destiny.

Mary kneels because doing so brings her close to the earth from which we are made. From that very earth the Word is made flesh and lives among us, fragile creatures of clay in whom the likeness of God cannot be ignored. The Latin word for the ground is *humus*, from which we draw our English word, humility.

You kneel in order to come close to the earth, where we find, in Jesus Christ, the humility of God, who invites us with open arms to learn the patient habits of living in peace on earth, as preparation for life in the glory and freedom of heaven.

So let us not be too proud to kneel at the crib, this Christmastide, and to work for the day, “when peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendours fling, and the whole world give back the song which now the angels sing”.