

**A Contemplative Christmas – Nativity (Matthew 1. 18-25)**

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Every year at Christmas, a journalist seems to ‘discover’ the startling fact that there are inconsistencies in the biblical accounts of Jesus’ birth. It is reported that the birth is narrated at all in only two of four gospels, that only Luke has shepherds and a stable and only Matthew has (an unspecified number of) wise men, that our traditional nativity tableau is a composite and that (surely) this must *prove* that it can’t possibly have ‘really’ happened. Every year, churches around the world carry on more or less unperturbed, celebrating the birth of Jesus according to the composite picture, with shepherds, oxen and asses jostling alongside three wise men and even a little drummer boy for places near the manger, with angels singing on high and a vengeful King Herod looming in the background. And every year, preachers are faced with the task of trying to communicate what earthly difference this tableau is supposed to make against a radically altered symbolic horizon.

Well, it strikes me that there are two interconnected challenges posed by the Christmas sermon. The first is to say something about the meaning of Christmas, and the second is to say something about its historicity, its significance as event. Here’s my attempt for this year.

First – event. At the heart of the Christmas story is the testimony that, spiritually speaking, ‘matter matters’. The story of Jesus’ birth is a proclamation that the medium of God’s self-communication as well as the object of God’s reconciling love is the material world. We see this in the nativity tableau itself. The meaning (the Word) of God

is communicated not as an abstract generality or principle, but in a *life*, begun at a specifiable time and place, the life of Jesus of Nazareth. To the embodiment of God by this new life, the whole social order is called upon to testify, from the despised and morally suspect shepherd class of Israel who are the first to be given the good news, to wealthy foreigners whose system of wisdom is bowed down in worship before a deeper truth. From the ox and ass to the angels in heaven, the non-human world also gathers to bear witness to this Word of God communicated as child.

And what does this life mean? What does this Word say? It says, so tradition interprets it, that the reality at the source of all things has entered the created order without reserve and without safety net; it means that God is such as to take human form, and freely accepts the constraints and vulnerabilities of human life; it means that henceforth divinity is known pre-eminently to us by this movement of self-giving and self-emptying for love's sake. How does this help us? Why is this movement understood as bringing our 'salvation'?

In the fifth century, in one of the great Christmas sermons, St Leo the Great spoke of Jesus' birth in terms of the transformation of human nature. He called this transformation 'divinisation'. God has become human so that human beings might become divine. Now where Leo speaks of divinisation, we, I think, might more readily speak of the transformation of human consciousness. In practice, in human experience, this means our transformation from a limited, dualistic, rivalrous state of mind and heart to the unitive awareness and universal love of the mystics and saints, the unifying consciousness of Christ. So let me say a bit more about this.

The problem with dualistic consciousness (the default human state) is that it is essentially alienated and alienating. It is (as the writer of John's gospel put it) 'darkness rather than light'. This is because it arises from or is sourced in the experience of threat and the felt need to carve out in hostile territory a place and identity for myself.

Sometimes the threat comes from within, as when I feel as though some aspect of myself needs to be suppressed or rejected if I'm going to survive or succeed. Sometimes the threat comes from without, from others who seem my rivals for attention, acceptance or status. From this threatened place, 'me' is always separate from and over against 'you', and the possibility of distorted perception, injustice, conflict or even violence is always near at hand.

The transformation from a dualistic to unitive consciousness is at the heart of the spiritual journey. It is what it means to become 'Christ-like' and capable of non-possessive, unconditional love. It involves the progressive detachment from the threatened, separate ego-self, discovering that beyond this self I am identified with and fear to let go, is a reality that is not afraid and whose nature is boundless compassion. It is to discover that 'me' is not essentially separate from 'you', but that we belong inalienably to one another, brothers and sisters, 'fragile fellow creatures' (as Rowan Williams has put it) 'held alike in the love of God'. To be a partaker in the divine nature, to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, is to begin to know this reality in our own experience and so to live from it, to enjoy and make visible the true ground of human life as freedom and love, justice and peace.

Now what does Christmas have to do with this journey? Two things, at least.

First, it teaches us that just as God's journey to us involves radical vulnerability and participation in bodily life, so does our journey to God, to union. We cannot be transformed just in our heads, in the abstract, by 'believing' certain truths or holding certain values. Spiritual truth has to be embodied, en fleshed to be realised. We know that from our own experience – if we fall in love for the first time or suffer the death of a loved one, we say I thought I knew what 'love' was, I thought I knew what 'grief' meant, but now I see I knew nothing at all. Being changed by the lived experience of these things is inseparable from what it means to know them. It is the same with the

way of transformation. Jesus says to his disciples, 'Come and see'. Get up, leave your old securities and safety-nets behind, step onto the path, give away your possessions, restore what you have taken, follow me. Spiritual truth has to be embodied to be realised, and that involves the risk of the whole of the self.

How do we take this risk, say yes to this invitation? Again, the manner of God's coming among us shows us the way. We are transformed into Christ-likeness in the same way that Christ became human – by a way of humility, self-giving and poverty. This is not about self-flagellation or masochism. It is simply about the risk of being fully present, yielded and responsive to a larger truth. We are enabled, empowered to make this journey of self-gift just because of the unconditional love of God for us, which proves the friendship of ultimate reality. God's self-gift in Jesus assures us that as we yield ourselves to this way, we will be met not by annihilation but by grace. And it is this same grace that completes our transformation.

None of what I have said makes the Christmas story (in the abstract) more believable. The proclamation of God's nativity, God's birth in human form, cannot be explained and it remains essentially profoundly strange and beyond our grasp, a total subversion of what we might have expected from divinity. But our incapacity wholly to grasp it doesn't mean it is nonsense. It is simply that knowing its truth calls for our willingness to embody it in our own lives – taking the risk of whole-heartedly giving ourselves in love rather than holding back in fear, taking the risk of offering peace and forgiveness, where it would be easier to condemn and blame. In this way, we are transformed, divinised: and Christ, the meaning of God, is born in our hearts as well as in Bethlehem.