

Love is Born

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I**Once or Twice or Three Times, I Saw Something**

Once or twice or three times, I saw something
rise from the dust in the yard, like the soul
of the dust, or from the field, the soul-body
of the field – rise and hover like a veil in the sun
billowing – as if I could see the wind itself.
I thought I did it – squinting – but I didn't.
As if the edges of things blurred – so what was in
bled out, breathed up and mingled: bush and cow
and dust and well: breathed a field I walked through
waist high, as through high grass or water, my fingers
swirling through it – or it through me. I saw it.
It was thing and spirit both: the real
world: evident, invisible.

by Marie Howe

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (Luke 2.1-7)

We know the drill – the baby in the manger, the parents far from home, the swaddling bands, no room at the inn – the props of the Christmas fairy tale ...

But every element points to a truth at the heart of the world; every element tells truth about the nature of reality and the possibilities of being – if we learn to read the signs.

Truth one: there is an intersection – an overlap – between time and timelessness, matter and spirit ... and sometimes we notice it, we glimpse in the midst of the ordinary the otherworld breaking through. Like the poet Marie Howe: seeing ‘thing and spirit both – the real world: evident **and** invisible’.

It’s like that on Christmas night. A young family is on the move, caught up in events as the administration of Empire grinds on. Mary goes into labour and is delivered of her son and the child is laid in the manger. So far, so human; so ordinary. But it turns out, for those with hearts attuning, there’s something more to be seen here, a breakthrough between worlds is underway. In Bethlehem’s dark streets is shining the everlasting light.

II

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ (Luke 2.8-15)

Truth one: there is an intersection between matter and spirit, time and timelessness. Truth two: We do not live in a closed system. Newness happens, birth. It arrives as if from outside or beyond this world – yet realises the deepest potential within it.

The shepherds are expecting nothing, waiting on nothing. But suddenly, everything is changed. The utter strangeness of God waits in the heart of what is familiar – as if the world were always on the edge of some total revolution, pregnant with a different kind of life ... and we – always trying to catch the blinding momentary light of its changing.¹

BC:AD

This was the moment when Before
Turned into After, and the future's
Uninvented timekeepers presented arms.

This was the moment when nothing
Happened. Only dull peace
Sprawled boringly over the earth.

This was the moment when even energetic Romans
Could find nothing better to do
Than counting heads in remote provinces.
And this was the moment

When a few farm workers and three
Members of an obscure Persian sect
Walked haphazard by starlight straight
Into the kingdom of heaven.

by Ursula Fanthorpe

III

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. (Luke 2.16-19)

Truth three: It is possible for human being to be wholly saturated by love.
Christmas is called the Feast of the Incarnation – and incarnation means

¹ Rowan Williams, *Ponder These Things: Praying with Icons of the Virgin* (Melbourne: John Garratt Publishing, 2002), p.xvii.

‘becoming flesh’, carnal, embodied. At Christmas, we proclaim that love is born in human form. This child in the manger is love’s embodiment – God’s embodiment – and manifests love’s vulnerability.

Because real love is always vulnerable. Vulnerable to being rejected, to going unrecognised, to being taken for granted. Real love has no power to force or coerce or manipulate a response. It can only draw us by its beauty and goodness and truth. If love is to be answered, if love is to be fulfilled, it must freely be received ... and returned ... Take a moment, touch into your heart ... be open to love ...

Prayers

We give thanks for the truth of Love at the heart of the world, for the mystery of Love’s power to heal our wounds, give balm to our sorrow, calm our fear.

This Christmas, let us bring before the Power of Love, all who suffer and perpetrate cruelty, all who ache for the sorrows of the world and who grieve for themselves, all who fear for the future – remembering especially those displaced by war and disaster, those suffering under despotic regimes, those excluded from community and those who are homeless, stateless, sick, dying and bereaved.

As we open our hearts to the Gift of Love, may our capacity for loving expand. **Amen**