

Transitions (Matthew 2.13-23)

© Sarah Bachelard

At Christmas, something new happened. Even more than the birth of a child, according to the gospels, Christmas marks the dawning of a new age – a new season for human kind and the earth community. And as always at a point of major transition, there is tension between welcoming and desiring the new beginning, and fearing and resisting the associated ending.

In Luke's gospel, the readings straight after Christmas tend to focus on the desire for and celebration of the birth as the 'dawn from on high' breaking upon God's people, fulfilling their long-held hopes. At the infant Jesus' Presentation in the Temple, Simeon rejoices that 'my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples' and Anna praises God and speaks about the child 'to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem', though a darker note is sounded when Simeon tells Mary that: 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too' (Luke 2.34-35).

In Matthew, the same theme of joyful recognition is explored through the story of the Magi who follow the star and pay homage to the child – and we'll hear more of this next week. But overwhelmingly, this gospel focuses on the resistance the birth provokes, the fear of loss and change. It depicts the terrible power of the system, personified in King Herod, ruthlessly determined to preserve its own privilege at any cost – sensing in this birth, this embodied presence of God – an existential threat. And I think it's part of the wisdom of this text that it reminds us there's something that all of us find difficult here – even if we don't act it out in murderous ways. In his famous poem, 'The Journey of the Magi', T.S. Eliot imagines this felt sense of threat, this ambivalence about newness and the

process of transformation, even in the Magi themselves. In the poem's final stanza, he has one of the foreign kings speaking thus:

All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

That's what the coming of Jesus does – makes us 'no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation, With an alien people clutching their gods'. And yet, at the same time, we can also fear to let go the securities of the past, no matter how illusory or inadequate they are revealed to be.

This is the world, then, this is the ambivalent welcome, into which Christ comes. It is a world, as we often say, of wonder and delight – a good creation, beautiful, nurturing of life in abundance. **And** it is a world of threat. There's the sheer risk of embodiment and of living in a physical universe, in a mortal frame, and the suffering and danger that comes with that. And there's the threat of living in the midst of human beings so determinedly pursuing their own interests and power, so terrified of loss and vulnerability, that they will sacrifice others without a second thought.

This is the world into which Jesus comes, exposed, undefended. Just as all of us do ... at the mercy of the families we're born into which may or may not be capable of providing us enough security to get well-started in life; at the mercy of the genes we inherit, the times and places we live in, the sheer randomness of events. In Australia this week, we've heard the terrible story of three very young children whose parents were killed in a car accident in country Western Australia

in the early hours of Christmas day, a five, two and one-year old trapped in the car with their dead parents for 55 hours before they were discovered ... and you think of how the trauma of those days may well shape the whole of their lives. The slaughter of innocents. And there are other stories – of drownings, indigenous deaths in custody, of freezing and dying alone ... all somehow particularly painful because of their juxtaposition with the supposed joy of Christmas.

Yet the gospels are crystal clear that God does not come to rescue us from the terrifying risk of embodied life, but to share it. God does not cancel the threat but comes to empower us to be in the midst of it in a particular way – in a way that remains open to possibility and deep listening, that continues to love in the face of fear and unimaginable loss, that calls us to be with and for one another and ourselves, redeeming and transforming suffering by undergoing it truthfully, our wounds becoming sacred wounds – portals to grace.

Christmas does not remove the world's pain – there's even a sense in which it intensifies it, provokes it. And yet, simultaneously, it reveals there is a truth even deeper than our pain – an encompassing, compassionate, never failing love giving itself towards us and calling us out of Egypt, out of slavery, alienation, fear and dispossession, calling us home.

We stand on the threshold of a new year. Last Saturday, we celebrated the gift of God's love for us, and within a week, we have been reminded – in our families and in our own spirits, in the tragedies reported in the news and the injustices and wars grinding on – that at one level, it makes no difference at all. Everything can carry on unchanged, in the old dispensation. Except – not quite. For the birth has happened, the resource is given ... deep in the earth, the seed of transformation has been planted. I invite you now then to take a few deep breaths and enter the space of the heart ... let us be aware of our yearning for home, for love ... and aware too of our fear, our ambivalence, our reluctance to be changed or let go the old securities... As we enter this new year, let us not fear to bring the whole of ourselves before the face of God, asking that God work in us that which is pleasing in God's sight (Hebrews 13.21).