

A new beginning

So here we are! Christmas Eve. On the brink of celebrating something truly wonderful and awe inspiring if we stop to think about it.

The fact that God - the One who created us, the source of all that is, the mystery at the heart of existence - became human and is now among us, is to be encountered in the events, the flesh and blood, of our lives, incarnate. God born in a stable, to two young people, one who had the courage to say yes to an incredible call, and the other the courage to stick by her. *They* brought “eternity” into the world, a child, as Denise Levertov puts it, “needing, like any other, milk and love - but who was God.”

Like Jesus on his knees washing his disciples feet, like Jesus on the cross, Christmas tells us a lot about who God is and where He has chosen to be found. It's no accident that something so stupendous happens incredibly humbly, no fanfares. It's very small, unpretentious, very ordinary, very *human*. It's a quiet, almost isolated, event - very limited (as it will be for many this Christmas). Just a young couple, displaced by a census, forced to take refuge in a cave, a manger, because, after going from door to door, there's nowhere else to go, that's all that's on offer. And they are alone – there's no-one else around, only the animals. The shepherds and magi and the choirs of angels all come later when it's all done. Right now, it's just them facing this moment - on their own. *This is where God is* and this is how He chooses to come into the world. Very human, very fragile, yet very beautiful and wonderful. Like many such beginnings and so much of life – not always ideal, often very human and limited and uncertain, often not very comfortable, often a whole mixture of things – feelings of joy, hope, love mixed in with feelings of trepidation, fear, uncertainty. Where will it all lead? How will it all work out? God is there....

And what has brought them to this moment? - their love for each other, Joseph's willingness to trust his fiancée no matter what, both of them listening to voices of angels and dreams, and being willing to bet their lives on what they hear, to give their all even in the midst of the uncertainty, willing to believe what lies deepest within them though so many voices might whisper: “no, it's a waste, an illusion”. This journey they make together, in fear and trembling, to this moment – the moment that changes the world. A child is born - God comes into the world as a small helpless infant, utterly human, sharing our flesh, our limitations, our dreams, our sufferings. It is a beautiful moment, in this place which Patrick Kavanagh calls “the stable where time begins.” Eternity has come among us, to feel and see and experience and hope and dream with us. Heaven and earth have come together, and life will never be the same again.

So where is God to be found in life? Not in some perfect world or perfect person, but in *our imperfect humanity*, in the flesh of our lives. The flesh of our families, our friends, our own broken imperfect bodies. In our dreams, our failures, our regrets, our meanness, our broken promises, our disappointments, our limits, all the events of our lives. *God is there in all of it* – waiting for us. This is where He has chosen to be. The kingdom of heaven is already among us. “The Word became flesh and lived among us.”

Christmas calls us to rekindle the hope within us, to open our hearts again, to begin again.

To believe again that God is love and to listen to the call of love in our lives.

You sometimes hear adults say: “Christmas is for children really.” Maybe that’s true! You see children aren’t afraid to dream, children have no problem believing that goodness can make a difference, children still have the capacity and freshness for wonder, for finding joy in life, for seeing the miracle in things. Children are still willing to trust, they aren’t afraid to believe that wishes can come true, and that what you do can make a difference. They are capable of acts of immense generosity and open-heartedness. They haven’t “learned life’s lesson” yet and in that they have something to teach us.

Perhaps they can prompt us to open our eyes and our hearts again to life, to joy, to hope, to love, to each other - to God’s presence in the people who are around you in your life now, in the view outside your window, the sunlight overhead, the hopes and dreams and love in your heart. He is there...

“The Word was made flesh and lived among us.”

St. Paul tells us with shocking abruptness: “You know, the time has come - you must wake up now.” Because God is already in your life and in your heart, in what is best and most beautiful within you. He is, as Penelope Wilcock put it, in “the word, whispered deep in our soul, from somewhere as far outside ourselves as the stars, yet as near as our own shuddering breath.” He is there already whispering to you – listen “with the ear of your heart” (as St Benedict would say). Look around you. What is he trying to show you? What is he trying to say to you? Look at your life now – He is already there!

Perhaps he comes to you through a particular person, or people, an experience, a book, a piece of music, a moment in quiet – that awakens something in you. Or

where something touches you, even if only vaguely, when something attracts you, fascinates you, challenges you, awakens in you a hunger, brings alive a hope, a possibility, a promise. He is there.

And he's there also in the moments when the human burden feels too much - moments of weakness, of tiredness, of despondency, of failure. "The Word became flesh." He is there too, if you are open to him, to bring what only he can bring. As the Prophet Isaiah puts it: "He will remove the mourning veil, the sadness, we carry. He will wipe away the tears from every cheek, he will take away his people's shame." (Isaiah 25:6-10)

There is so much the Lord wants to do for us. But it's not magic – it is always our choice, to open our lives to him, to really let him in. For that to happen there are certain things we need to be willing to do.

We need to be willing to be simple, to choose to be open, to trust what is deepest, simplest and most human within you. "Unless you become like little children you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:3)

You need to trust Him, enough to allow Him to guide you, making him part of our lives, sharing our life with him and listening to Him. We are not alone – in the deepest part within us we are not alone. Choose to listen and look like a disciple – Where is He present today? Where am I being led today, what is being asked of me? He will lead you. "You will show me the path of life, the fullness of joy in your presence, at your right hand happiness for ever." (*Psalms 16:11*)

Learn slowly to say "yes" as Mary did - this is the way home! –And He promises: "Surely I know the plans I have for you, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. When you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you. When you search for me, you will find me." (Jeremiah 29:11-13)

Most of all you have to be willing to love. The Gospel is very simple really, The Good News very human: "Love one another. This is where I am."

In one of the parishes I worked in we decided one Advent to have a giving tree put up in the church. It's like a Christmas tree except that, instead of decorations, there were labels put on the branches. Each label had something written on it – a pair of gloves, a scarf, some toiletries – simple but thoughtful things. And people were asked to take one, to buy the present and wrap it and to place it with a card under the tree. They would then be all collected and

distributed at Christmas to people who might not have much or be receiving much. People were incredibly generous and thoughtful! One incident struck me very deeply. One of the people distributing the presents came to my door to tell me. She had called to a very elderly lady living on her own. When she handed her the present and card, wishing her a happy Christmas, the lady's eyes filled with tears: "Thank you so much, she said. You have made my Christmas! As you can see, I am on my own now. I haven't received a present for some years now and never expected to receive one again. Thank you!"

It is the simplest things that make the most difference, that make up all we most treasure in life, and it is their absence that causes the most pain. It is here God has chosen to live – in the love that is communicated daily in those simple things but powerful things of life.

So today say "yes" to this Christmas, to Christ, to God among us. Look up at the stars tonight and say: "Yes, whatever you want to bring about – yes!" And say that "yes" – to all that lies waiting within you to come to life – all the goodness, the love, all you can do and will do in the world.

And say "yes" to how God is present in the flesh today in very simple real human even imperfect ways in your family, your friends, in yourself.

How he is there in your dreams..

How he wants to open your eyes and your heart.

Say "yes".

And say a prayer for those who are lonely or cold or hungry or ill or afraid this Christmas.

Christ comes to be born today, not just in a stable 2000 years ago, but in you, in your relationships, in your life. God waits... Say "yes!"

"Look, I am standing at the door, knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share your meal, side by side with you." (Rev 3:20)

May you discover him with you this Christmas - by your side, in your heart, in your neighbour.

Happy Christmas!