

The Gift of God to Us is Life in Christ Jesus

Home Retreat

18 December 2021

This Home Retreat considers how the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love can help us to prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ at Christmas, welcoming him into our hearts.

Writing about the birth of Jesus of Nazareth in the Prologue to his Gospel, St John says the following:

The Word was made flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John 1:14)

In other words, in the birth of Jesus, the Eternal Second Person of the Trinity, the Divine Son, whilst not relinquishing his divinity, took our human flesh, became a man, fully human just as we are, so that as St Athanasius taught, we might through grace share in the very life of God himself; and St Augustine of Hippo makes the same point, referring us back to St John, who wrote that ‘to all who did accept him he gave power to become children of God.’ (John 1:12)

This is what we celebrate at Christmas: the direct intervention of God in our world to free us from the corruption of sin and death, and to give us through faith and baptism the opportunity of real life – not a return to the old life of Eden, a happy human life somehow having been restored to us, but new and eternal life with God, a real sharing in the infinite and overflowing life of love that is the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. St John says the same at the beginning of his First Letter:

Something which has existed since the beginning, that we have heard, and have seen with our own eyes; that we have watched and touched with our hands: the Word who is life – this is our subject. That life was made visible: we saw it and we are giving our testimony, telling you of the eternal life which was with the Father and has been made visible to us. What we have seen and heard we are telling you so that you too may be in union with us, as we are in union with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing this to you to make our own joy complete. (1John 1:4)

In the Incarnation, God has spoken his Word – the Word which was His instrument of both Creation and Redemption – has spoken Himself, has in fact said all that there is to say about Himself, so that we may hear and respond, and so enjoy life with Him.

This, then – LIFE – is God's free gift to us in Christ Jesus our Lord (cf. Romans 6:23); and it begins now. We don't have to wait for the next life; rather, through our baptism in which we died with Christ to our sins and rose with him to new life, we share already, here and now, in the life of God. Through baptism, we become members of Christ, sharing life with one another through our incorporation into Christ, sharing in the life of the Trinity – a real and spiritual participation which must find expression and bear fruit in how we live here and now with each other. We form a community of believers called together by God for salvation, members of a genuine *koinonia*, the Greek word used in the New Testament to describe both the internal life of the Trinity and the body of baptised believers, a human and spiritual reality that is God's gift to us, 'communion.'

The Christian vocation, then, is both graced and exalted, the gift of God that promises us life and salvation. But, as we know, sin gets in the way, and we do not always live up to the gift – we have a tendency to do those things that lead us away

from God, and which are damaging to ourselves, as well as to other people. St Paul knew this well, as he wrote to the Galatians:

You were called, as you know, to liberty; but be careful, or this liberty will provide an opening for self-indulgence. Serve one another, rather, in works of love, since the whole of the Law is summarised in a single command: *Love your neighbour as yourself*. If you go snapping at each other and tearing each other to pieces, you had better watch or you will destroy the whole community.

Let me put it like this: if you are guided by the Spirit you will be in no danger of yielding to self-indulgence, since self-indulgence is the opposite of the Spirit, the Spirit is totally against such a thing, and it is precisely because the two are so opposed that you do not always carry out your good intentions. If you are led by the Spirit, no law can touch you. When self-indulgence is at work the results are obvious: fornication, gross indecency and sexual irresponsibility; idolatry and sorcery; feuds and wrangling, jealousy, bad temper and quarrels; disagreements, faction, envy; drunkenness, orgies and similar things. I warn you now, as I warned you before: those who behave like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. What the Spirit brings is very different: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control. There can be no law against things like that, of course. You cannot belong to Christ Jesus unless you crucify all self-indulgent passions and desires.

Since the Spirit is our life, let us be directed by the Spirit. (Gal. 5:13-26)

Jesus came among us as a man to bring us salvation, to offer us through his suffering, death and resurrection the promise of new and eternal life with God: a free gift, one quite unmerited by anything that we have done, but one that makes

demands of us – because it asks of us that we look at ourselves and at other people through God’s eyes and not simply our own.

As St Paul also wrote to the Galatians, God’s gift to us in Jesus is freedom: ‘When Christ freed us, he meant us to remain free... [and] not submit again to the yoke of slavery.’ (Gal. 5:1) But fallen human beings that we are, we have an almost unerring ability – without God’s help, at any rate – to enslave and trap ourselves in ways of thinking and acting that are not truly free. Although we desire the Lord, and to some extent have experienced and know our dependency upon Him, we have a tendency to shy away from letting go of those things that block, or at least hinder, His active presence in our lives – whether these be habitual ways of thinking and behaving, resentment and bitterness occasioned by hurt and its consequent anger, or perhaps the uncertainty that comes from the prospect of giving up what we know and handing everything over to God, even when we know deep down that this is for the best. When we think and behave in these ways, we limit our horizons and thus stop ourselves becoming the people we were created to be, from living freely. As Jesus said to the Samaritan woman at the well, ‘If only you knew what God is offering.’ (John 4:10)

We need to learn to become fully transparent to the Lord, to be vigilant over our thoughts and actions, examining them in the light of faith to see whether our ears are really open to hearing His call and our eyes to seeing the possibilities that He holds out to us. We need to grow in patience, so as to endure in love, and for the Lord’s sake, the things that we perceive as slights and injuries, allowing our difficulties and sufferings to detach us from our own will and to reveal to us God’s immediacy. And our hope must become more profound, so that gradually we learn to hand over to the Lord our lives in their entirety. This spiritual (and human) growth is God’s work in us, but like the blind men in St Luke’s Gospel, who recognised Jesus with the messianic title, ‘Son of David’, we too need to find a wholehearted answer to the question which he put to them, ‘Do you believe that I can do this?’ (Matthew 9:28)

If we can answer, 'Yes', and can really live in faith, hope and love – with Jesus at the centre of our life, consciously cultivating an awareness of his presence, as St Teresa of Avila taught, offering ourselves to him, learning to prefer nothing to the love of him – then, over time we will be freed from the restrictions that we impose upon ourselves; and we will be freed to learn to love God for Himself, and in consequence each one of us individually, will learn to put into practice the 'new commandment': 'Love one another just as I have loved you.' (John 13:34) God's defining attribute is His loving mercy; and if we can give ourselves up to Him, learning, in Jesus' words to 'be compassionate as your Father is compassionate' (Luke 6:36), then we will no longer simply cling to how we think things or other people should be, but in giving ourselves up to God in love, we will be liberated from our self-imposed restrictions that turn us in on ourselves and in so doing prevent us from seeing others as God sees them, stunting our human and spiritual growth.

In learning to see ourselves and others as God sees us, we learn humility, 'purity of heart' as the monastic tradition calls it. It comprises a ready recognition of just who we are and what we are really like when we look at ourselves in the presence of God; a ready recognition of our need and absolute dependence upon the God, who is simply love; the ability to see not only ourselves as God sees us, but to recognise how God sees other people – a recognition that will free us from the restriction that we place upon ourselves when we in our short-sightedness and conceit fail to see how God is present and acting in their lives and fail to value them as redeemed children of God. Put simply, purity of heart teaches us to place ourselves in God's hands without restriction, just as we are, so that in His love and mercy He may complete in us His work of creation and redemption. As St Paul wrote to the Romans:

This seems to be the rule, that every single time I want to do good it is something evil that comes to hand. In my inmost self, I dearly love God's

Law, but I can see that my body follows a different law that battles against the law which my reason dictates. This is what makes me a prisoner of that law of sin which lives inside my body.

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body doomed to death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 7: 21-24)

So, as we prepare to celebrate Christ's birth, let us take encouragement from his own words, 'I have come so that they may have life and have it to the full.' (John 10:10)

Questions for Reflection

Prayerful reflection on the Biblical texts above might help the consideration of the questions below offered as a possible way of reflecting upon God's gift to us in Jesus.

Do I really live in a way that reflects my faith that in Jesus God has become fully human?

How do I know that my love for God is real?

What are the things that limit the ways in which I try to love God and other people for His sake?

To what extent do I really know my need of God?

Do I really put my hope in God or do I simply rely on myself?

What prayer will I make for this year's celebration of Christ's birth to make a real difference in my life?