

John Docherty, December 22, 2013

The mystery of God's dwelling, ... in the child that is born!

I think the theme of this 4th Sunday of Advent begins to capture something of the reason why I have always said that Christmas is easily my favourite part of the Christian calendar : the mystery of God taking on human form. And not only taking on human form, but taking on that form via the whole mystery of conception, gestation and birth that is shared with every other human on the planet. God dwelling in this child that is born.

I see no reason why God couldn't have simply fashioned a fully formed adult human body and strode into Jerusalem one fine day to bring the message of repentance, reconciliation and peace. In some ways it would have been a much simpler strategy : none of the complicated human linkages that beset *us*. Just this mysterious stranger speaking words of wisdom, performing miracles, healing broken lives.

The Jesus story could have played out in exactly the same way in every respect, otherwise. This man could have moved about, telling his stories. He could have faced the same challenges to his authority, the same threats, the same ultimate fate of betrayal, torture and death. And, of course, he could have had the same resurrection.

In fact, without the baggage of a human family, and a human history, this God/Man might have had a decidedly easier time of it. At least in the sense that he might have been more clearly seen to have been God in the flesh after his resurrection, and perhaps even during his ministry.

I know there are theological arguments to explain why it was necessary for Jesus to be seen to be fully human, with a human genealogy : the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy; the legitimization of his message by the legitimization of his place in the Jewish world; a human substitutionary atonement for human sins.

I don't reject these arguments, but these explanations aren't the reason I love Christmas.

No. The reason I love Christmas is much simpler than that. It has very little to do with the technical side of fulfilled prophecy (though it is linked to that prophecy), or the Jewish credentials of this messiah-child, or a heavy theology of atonement.

My love of Christmas has much more to do with the magic and mystery of this event, the human-ness of this messiah-child, and the *promise* of a very different kind of world heralded by this birth.

Of course, a lot of it also has to do with how I experienced Christmas as a child. I wasn't raised in an ethnic Mennonite home, so I don't know how the whole secular / sacred balance thing was / is handled in homes like that, but in our good Scottish catholic home we didn't agonize too much over details.

We embraced the whole package : the Christmas story, the child in the hay trough, the star in the heavens, the wise men from the East, shepherds, angels, donkeys, inns, stables ... and Santa coming down the chimney, magically leaving presents under the tree, and stuffing the stockings hung on the mantelpiece.

Fortunately, my first 7 Christmases were spent in a Glasgow tenement flat that was heated by open coal fires, so we actually had a chimney for Santa to use, and a mantelpiece for our stockings.

I still remember my mom making me write my Christmas wish-list letter to Santa every year, then reading it (only to check my spelling, of course), then burning it in the fireplace so that the smoke, and its message, could be carried up to the North Pole.

Even the church celebration of Christmas wasn't ordinary : it was a mass that took place at *midnight!* How awesome is that?! Even the hymns were great (which they weren't usually). These Christmas songs were all happy, joyful, life-filled songs that everybody loved to sing in full voice in a way that was almost never heard on Sunday mornings.

Even my dad, that self-described communist, atheist catholic, loved midnight mass. It was the only time he would voluntarily enter a church other than for weddings and funerals, though, even then, it was usually only if he'd had a few drinks and was feeling a bit sentimental.

He loved the *feeling* of midnight mass, and the *feeling* of Christmas.

And, though he hated the church and all things hierarchical or that smacked of class distinction, he would never miss the chance to watch Charles Dickens' Christmas Carol if it was on TV. And he would revel in the redemption of that hard-hearted old capitalist, Ebenezer Scrooge.

And yes, I know that the Coca Cola Santa Claus is a warped and crass deformation of Saint Nicholas. That he is a corporate stooge who's real purpose is to get us to spend money – as much money as we can – and to start doing that as soon as Hallowe'en is past.

I know that, and I resent and resist that excess and consumerism.

But I don't resent or resist the spirit of generosity and empathy that Christmas generates. I don't think I'm being manipulated when I feel like tipping a little more freely at Christmas, or when I invest hours making gifts for my kids or my grandkids.

If we can hold the excesses of the consumer Christmas at bay, I think this season provides us with opportunities for really extending our appreciation for each other in ways that may seem out of place at other times of the year.

Because, at that stable in Bethlehem there were gifts. Gifts brought by mysterious astrologers from the East, granted. Men following a star with a mind of its own, yes. Men bringing gold for a king, and frankincense for a man of God, and myrrh for ... well, among other things, myrrh was a valuable oil or resin used in some places for embalming the dead – a kind of a somber gift for a newborn, but perhaps a hint of things to come for this particular child.

I've said before that I feel more truly "Christian" at Christmas than at other points in the Christian calendar. It's a season that tends to bring out the best in us.

There was a time, not so long ago, that Christian nations at war with each other would choose not to kill each other on Christmas day. How's that for the spirit of the season!

And, I admit, that sentimental feeling of this time of the year is important to me, too. There's an *innocence* tied up with this baby in a manger that I think I crave. I

want to believe. Not in Santa so much ... not anymore, at least. But in the promise of this baby's birth. I *want* to believe that when the angels announced "... Peace on earth, good will towards men ..." that there was truth in that song. I *want* to believe that the birth of this child is good news. That there really is a different way of being, that we really are capable of loving each other in ways we rarely exhibit at other times.

Jesus said, in Matthew 18 : "... unless you become like a child, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven ..."

In my evangelical background, this was generally understood to mean that we needed to accept Jesus with the faith of a child – that faith being a simple, uncomplicated faith that didn't need a lot of "Why?" questions, because Jesus was the answer to every question.

I'm not so sure I like that understanding so much anymore, because most children I know love to ask "Why?" Not in a cynical, defiant way, but in a genuine attempt to understand. They see or hear something that doesn't make sense to their developing minds, and they quite naturally seek out an explanation that will help them put the pieces together. They take it on faith that what we tell them is true, but they aren't shy about wanting to know *why* it is true.

And they ask those questions precisely because they *are* innocent. There's not a lot of filtering going on. They say what they think, and they assume we are doing the same.

I participate from time to time in a videoconference with other interim pastors in MCEC. At one of our recent exchanges, we were asked to share a little about ourselves, and how we resource ourselves.

I responded to the question, in part, by saying that I like to spend time with my grandsons. I like to spend time with them because I'm convinced that our relationships with small children are the closest any of us are ever going to get to experiencing unconditional love here on earth. Whether it's with our own children, our grandchildren, our nieces and nephews, our young cousins, or our young neighbours – if we can gain their love, we've gained an incredible gift.

As I said a few moments ago, there's not a lot of filtering going on. There's no hidden agenda; no carefully choreographed interactions; no tit for tat set of expectations. If they love you, they love you. Period.

Of course, as we children grow; as we get answers to our "Why?" questions; as we learn that others are not an extension of ourselves; as we learn that not everything is *mine*; as we develop strategies to navigate this life; our innocence is left behind.

Our trust, we learn, is sometimes misplaced. We learn that not everyone can be trusted, and some people can only be trusted sometimes, and with certain things.

We learn that our innocence (now subtly morphed, and perceived as naiveté) can sometimes make us vulnerable, so we learn to protect ourselves.

We learn that we can be hurt if we are too open, too transparent, so we become less so. We learn to filter what we say. We learn to fashion masks for ourselves, and we show the world only a version of who we are. The mask is real, and a really good facsimile of our face, but it's a carefully crafted, and selective face.

We learn that we have power. And we learn to use it. And, sometimes, we learn to *abuse* it.

Or – we learn that we are powerless, and we devise strategies to protect ourselves.

And through all of this process, we leave behind our childhood, and our innocence, and we grow up. We take on responsibilities, and we build a life for ourselves.

Paul writes in the 13th chapter of 1st Corinthians that "...When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways."

He says this in the context of his very famous chapter on the importance of love. We generally understand him to be saying that in some respects we're like children who only have a limited understanding of what it means to love, but that someday we will really understand what God's love is like. And I'm fine with that reading.

But you know, I think I'm also able to read that statement about putting away childish things and hear a tone of voice that carries a little bit of regret. A voice

that betrays a certain longing for the innocent days of childhood when love *was* able to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things ...

Christmas, for me, then, is a time to embrace anew the promise inherent in this infant in the manger. The promise that peace on earth is possible. The promise that it really is within our capacity to have good will towards all. The promise that if we are able to recognize, and value, and aspire to the innocence of a child, with all of the risks and vulnerability that that implies, that we really do have some hope of finding our way to heaven.