



Convent of the Incarnation, Oxford

PANDEMIC REFLECTIONS (3): CHRISTMAS IS COMING – *without the kids?*

It would seem that, whatever the particular circumstances, Christmas this year is going to be different. We might profoundly regret that Midnight Mass to Mozart, Carols around the Crib or Christingle celebrations with mince pies and mulled wine may not be on offer this year but, once we are over the shock of

such realisations, what gift might the Giver of all good gifts be offering us through this crisis?

Perhaps, firstly, God might be offering a stark reminder that Christmas isn't about these temporal wrappings of the Feast and asking us to consider how much they have become more important than the gift itself. The virus we face is deeper than the bodily sickness it brings – it can poison the heart with fear and anger, the very opposites of what Christ brings through his birth.

One 'good' thing about the pandemic is that it invites us to notice how we respond when the wrappings are removed. To paraphrase a saying, what is the point of celebrating Christ's birth in Bethlehem 2000 years ago unless I can celebrate that he is being born in my heart today? It might give us cause to stop and ponder what it must be like for those housebound and alone, those held as political prisoners in non-Christian countries, or those whose poverty means they 'cannot afford Christmas'. These words from *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* by George Gissing seem appropriate:

'I would not now, if I might, be one of a joyous company; it is better to hear the long-silent voices, and to smile at happy things which I alone can remember. When I was scarce old enough to understand, I heard read by the fireside the Christmas stanzas of 'In Memoriam'. Tonight I have taken down the volume, and the voice of so long ago has read to me once again — read as no other ever did, that voice which taught me to know poetry, the voice which never spoke to me but of good and noble things. Would I have those accents overborn by a living tongue, however welcome its sound at another time? Jealously I guard my Christmas solitude.'

He was not writing as a Christian but reminds us that solitude can bring its own blessings. Just as we will celebrate that God descended into the womb of Mary so we might look more deeply into what the pandemic might offer, and the most important thing is that it prevents us being blinded by all the externals we've grown accustomed to and says: what are you celebrating? Not firesides or families, that inner glow from carols sung in streets with roadways crisp with frost or all the 'sweet and silly Christmas things' John Betjeman wrote of in his poem *Christmas*. But that Love which, as Christina Rossetti wrote, came down at Christmas:

Love all lovely, Love Divine,
Love was born at Christmas,
Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
Love Incarnate, Love Divine,
Worship we our Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.

In preparing to celebrate the Incarnation, the enfleshment of Love, we need to see beneath the awful exterior of this pandemic the gift it can bring. God looked on the world with compassion and, with great humility, came amongst us: these gifts of compassion and humility Christ still offers and Christians are to embody. And if we find our hearts filling with the bitter thought or angry retort because we are being asked to give up some of the things we're accustomed to enjoy at Christmas, we need to stop and enfold them in God's most important gift of reconciling love which cannot be taken from us.

The star of Christ's birth shone in the darkest hour of the night and entered a land riven by division and fear. As it shone, angels were heard to sing the eternal *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*, that song we can sing in our heart, especially when the night is dark. For Christians are to be bearers of the Light of the Word which needs to be born in our heart, today. For us, the beauty of Jesus always lies before us, inviting us to look at him with the eye of our heart, to take him into our arms and smother him with our kisses. His Mother wraps him in swaddling clothes, but he would clothe *us* in himself – if we ask him. He will not leave us nor can he be taken from us, though we can neglect this new-born – yet he is there, saying: "I love you with a perfect love ... abide in that love".

This Christmas may lack some of the traditional trappings but, without them, we might see more clearly the Holy Child who would save us and enfold us, and all creation, in his Heart.

'I am convinced that it is everyone's task to work to reduce evil and suffering as much as possible, in our own sphere, humbly, simply, without concern for our precious personality, through dedication, love, the gift of ourselves to that which is our duty.
I believe that to accomplish this mission, the first thing to do is to try to become our best selves, even perhaps without knowing it. And God will do the rest.
Our effort, our sacrifices our actions, even the most hidden, will not be lost.
This is my absolute conviction. Everything has long-lasting and profound repercussions.
This thought leaves little room for discouragement, but it does not permit laziness.
We are poor day-laborers of life, we sow and God gives the harvest.'

(An extract from *A Mysticism of Kindness*, the biography of Lucie Christine, p.79)

Fr. John-Francis Friendship
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