

## The Face of a Baby

*If you dare to love, be prepared to grieve*

On Christmas Eve a few years ago when the assembled parishioners came to their feet for the gospel at mid night Mass, I noticed a tiny baby, no more than a few days old, asleep in her mother's arms. An idea hit me. I spoke briefly about the Almighty Creator and Judge that we worshipped and feared. 'How frightening would it be', I asked, 'if this omniscient God thundered into our world just now?' I stooped down to lift aloft the small child, no bigger than my fist. 'There,' I said, 'there is the power of God. Who can be afraid of a God like that?'



There are many faces to a baby. When you think about it, a baby is an amazing symbol of both power and powerlessness, or, perhaps, more accurately, of power within powerlessness. As I felt the totally trusting baby stir sleepily in my hands I thought about her utter vulnerability, her total trust. How ambiguous and paradoxical it all was. And how shocking, too. This is what love does. It gives away its power. It renders itself destructible. All of this runs against the grain of our competitive and controlling nature. How can weakness

ever be understood as the secret of true love? With every birth we ask ourselves the same question.

When loving couples have a baby, their lives become as precarious as that of the baby of their love. The beauty they have created shatters their former security. Their lives are irrevocably transformed. But that is what love is like. It surrenders. It has no more masks, no more expectations, no more certainties. The Bethlehem baby's defenceless presence, his shocking and precarious weakness, his over-turning of all our ideas about the nature of God, stun us into silence. It is in this sacred silence, during these few precious days, that the hard thoughts within us can soften, that the unforgiving walls of judgement and blame can crumble, that the cold shadows of our pride can be melted by the warmth of an infant's smile. Such is the power of a baby.

As R. S. Thomas puts it:

When we are weak, we are  
Strong. When our eyes close  
On the world, then somewhere  
Within us the bush  
Burns. When we are poor  
And aware of the inadequacy  
Of our table, it is to that,  
Uninvited, the guest comes.

There are so many reasons why our splintered world, with its broken dreams, sorely needs the life-giving good news revealed in the faces of a baby. Fearful and anxious, how urgently we await this revelation of God's accessibility in the fragile body of a child. Aggressive and violent, how much our trigger-happy leaders can learn from God's way of establishing peace in the open trust of a baby. At a time when anxious millions are only too familiar with the 'half-life' of mere existence, how life-giving it is to see, in a kicking, delighted infant, the call – and permission – for us too to 'go barefoot' into each day, to live our lives to the



full abundance of Life incarnate. And, in a divided, greedy, world divided between rich North and poor South, how desperately we all need the ultimate example of simply possessing nothing so that others may simply live. There is a cross, too, in the face of a

baby, for love and pain are conjoined twins. 'And thy own soul a sword shall pierce.' I think of my mum's heart when she realised from my brother Joseph's face that he was a Down's syndrome baby. She must have glimpsed a life of pain to come for all the family. If you dare to love, be prepared to grieve. How right she was!

The perennial infancy narratives do not hide the shadow of Good Friday that falls across the heart of the Christmas baby. In fact the story of the baby's birth is based on the death and resurrection of the grown



man. It follows that God's glory and beauty are revealed in poor, humble, hurting and self-effacing lives of faith and compassion. It can be fully present in failure, disgrace and ignominy. The mystery of God is disguised and veiled in the most hopeless places and people, in the margins of life, in the helplessness of a baby.



Babies transform us by not threatening us. They bless us with the inner freedom to be ourselves – just as they always are. A baby is an invitation that draws out what is best within us. We do not resist a baby's love; in fact, we sense we need it. Small wonder that God's redemptive self-emptying resulted in the wonder of a baby. And that Jesus, too, held up the child as the epitome of his mission and power. Babies heal us. 'The moment I first looked at my baby,' a young father told me, 'the stammer left me.' They transform what is negative so that it cannot be transmitted any more. In saying 'Yes' to life, the child takes the 'now' and makes it special. Because it yearns for life, it is, as if, it is insatiably addicted

to growing. The small child reaches for the moon through the windows of its wonder and it stirs us to do the same. The child does not quit on life. It has an indelible curiosity about tomorrow, a passion for the possible. It does not need to hope or believe. Like God incarnate, it delights, writes Thomas Aquinas, in the joy of simply being there.

Christmas is the celebration of the truth that God is always accessible within whatever is happening to us, not outside it; that if God cannot hold us in our sin and shame, then God is dead; that if God is not touching us in our weakness, then Christmas is a cruel joke. Cardinal Avery Dulles wrote: 'The Incarnation does not provide us with a ladder by which to escape the ambiguities of life and scale the heights of heaven, rather it enables us to burrow deep into the heart of planet Earth and find it shimmering with divinity.'

A trusting God risked placing a powerless baby in human hands to reveal and 'earth' the essence of divine, vulnerable and unconditional love. Astonishing though this mystery is, we still need sacramental moments to keep reminding us of it. Otherwise, because we are congenitally forgetful of our destiny, the miracle would grow dim and distant. These moments of revelation come to all of us in different ways. For a few of us it came during that Midnight Mass in a small Yorkshire school, when a trusting mother risked letting her baby into the clumsy hands of her parish priest. Such are the ordinary ways that the extraordinarily beautiful mystery will be remembered, and the perennial star will be re-lit – to warm and guide us through another year.

