

## Week Beginning 27th December

Christmas is the feast of the body: it celebrates the flesh. Yet too often we are taught to distrust bodies' beauty and wisdom. But they are the sacrament of the incarnation. Redemption, resurrection, the abundant life – they are ever only real when experienced in our essential humanity. It is in our bodies that we experience heaven. And in them that God experiences earth. Tradition calls this 'the dance of the hypostatic union in the human one'.

And God said:

May you delight in your body.

It is my body too.

Don't you know you are my senses?

Without your body I cannot be.

Were we to believe even a whisper of that revelation, adults would gather around the Christmas crib with astonished faces – astonished, as if for the first time, at the promised possibilities for their bodies and for the body of the world. It is a blessed scene about our own infancy and destiny as well as that of Jesus – a graced infancy in a graced humanity that grows more perfectly human even after our death, in the youthfulness of heaven. But not without its necessary deprivations and tears.

Indeed, after the Resurrection, the physical wounds of Jesus are ever honoured. embodiment, even in its pain and fragility, seems to be an essential condition of divinity. Michael Simmons Roberts writes in 'Food for Risen Bodies II':

Now on Tiberias' shores he grills  
a carp and catfish breakfast on a charcoal fire.  
This is not hunger, is resurrection:

he eats because he can, and wants to  
taste the scales, the moist flakes of the sea,  
to rub the salt into his wounds.<sup>39</sup>

Christmas reveals that we are all born with a divine star. Our bodies carry auras of inner loveliness. That is the meaning of the hallowed halo around the baby's sleepy head. We all have one! Its brightness does not depend on being successful at religion, on acquiring virtues and overcoming vices, on enforced beliefs and passing worthiness tests.

In 'icon', Lynn Roberts writes of an ordinary, hard-working woman. The poem ends:

Her face is olive and her hands have pads  
of calloused skin from grinding grain for flour;  
but if you concentrate, you'll see, perhaps,  
through her chemise a faint transparency  
which glows – as though she's swallowed fire.

As though she's swallowed fire' – like the flamenco dancer in her wild catharsis, like all our bodies when they fall in love with the God within them. That's the evocative language that best expresses the assumption of a receptive humanity by a hopelessly smitten divinity. 'As though she's swallowed fire' - not even the angels could say those words. Only we, who have senses.

In a delightful Advent homily 1,000 years ago, St Symeon wrote so beautifully of a lambent healing in our vulnerable bodies:

We awaken in Christ's body  
as Christ awakens our bodies ...

and everything that is hurt, everything  
that seemed to us ...  
maimed, ugly, irreparably damaged,  
is in Him transformed  
and recognized as whole, as lovely,  
and radiant in His light . . .

Christmas, therefore, asks us to name and recognise our own issues and prejudices with the human body in all its peculiarities, in its particular sexuality and ambiguity. It urges us to value and to embrace all those we recklessly label, scapegoat and sinfully diminish in our graceless ignorance and fear.

To raise our hands at anyone in our own home, to physically or spiritually abuse a child, to torture or mutilate anyone, for any reason, is to strike out at God's own face. So we learn to respect and grant justice to one another as divinely embodied people, with all our emotional differences. The crib confronts us with another way of understanding what incarnate beauty looks like. Incarnation irrevocably reveals that God has carefully created and tenderly blessed all people with dignity and worthiness. It insists that the first places at the holy altar of equality are always reserved for such special and beloved children of God.

Joseph, my brother, who had Down's syndrome (and who was once deemed unworthy to take his place at that table to make his first holy Communion), loved dancing. Unable to speak, he sang his story in his simple steps. Like the flamenco virtuoso, like the child in the fields of Bethlehem, Joseph's free movement flowed from within his own body with its unconventional gracefulness.

And when Joseph danced delightedly around our Christmas kitchen I used to think that the Lord of the Dance was tapping his foot too, and that, at least for those few moments, there was peace on earth.

(Travelling Light pp69,70)