

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 26th December – Treasured beyond measure

Too often at Christmas, the real magic is missed. There is nothing infantile about the infant; the innocence of the child is the power of God filling the hearts and souls of all beloved and broken people with hope and light

Back in the 1950s, during December days, at around 6 p.m., a small army of boys and girls were collected from the neighbouring villages of Knocknagree, Gneeveguilla and Barraduff, and taken to Rathmore Creamery, for the killing and plucking of the Christmas turkeys and geese. The staff did the killing; we did the plucking.

It was pure torture. Plucking resistant pin feathers from a tough and bony old bird was hardly an inspiring Advent ritual. It was ninepence for a cock, sixpence for a hen. The hens were easy. I wasted my whole first night trying to pluck a cock. Again and again I was refused my money – either there were some impossible feathers still attached, or the skin was bruised or bleeding, or the plucking checker did not like me.

This was my first introduction to paid work. Looking back now, I remember how upset I was at that hard world of earning, meriting and competing. There was little generosity in that smelly shed of flying fleas and feathers. You had to cajole and bargain for every last penny at the payout. Even in those young years, I wanted another kind of world – a more forgiving one, a more loving one, where all the pin feathers do not have to be removed. With a child's clarity, I longed for things to be different. I discovered later that they already were. But nobody told us.

One day, if we are lucky, the impact of Christmas stuns us. Something remarkable begins to dawn on us – the recognition that, despite its ugliness and evil, this wounded world is alive with love. We are treasured beyond measure by a mercy that does not depend on our worthiness – that carries no inspection for perfection.

Every year, we have Advent to remember and delight in this transforming story, this radical revelation that the divine Mystery is now flesh of our flesh, as intimate as our senses. The mystic within us knows that the same holds true of the world itself, that we must cherish it, because now we know it to be the precious body of God.

Incarnation is about the way we see things, the way we get hints of the holy, hidden nature of everything, especially of the experiences of our lives. Think, for instance, of the most complete, loving moment you can remember. Think of all that has ever moved you profoundly, whether this be the silence of the darkness, the forgiveness of a friend, or the wind in the winter trees. All of that is unearned, undeserved. And it is all free. We know this because of the baby.

There will, of course, be days when we doubt this. There is too much confusion around us, too much pain inside us. We lose our longing for the light. On Sunday we prayed for the removal of “the darkness that blinds us to the vision that fills the mind...” Midnight Mass reveals, to those who have learned to see, that these beautiful prayers are already answered – every day.

Reflect, for instance, on the utter surprise of feeling the invincible Spirit move in you, of sensing there is nothing you cannot be, or do. Think of the most liberating moments in your life – when, for instance, at the end of your worst night of loss, you still got up, drew back the curtains, and, without knowing why, your stalled heart began to beat with hope again.

Or think of the most courageous moment that still makes your eyes shine. Think of the time when you reached way beyond yourself, when you stretched for what was out of reach, when someone or something carried you to a place you had only dreamed of, when you felt at one with everything, and sensed that your forgiving look was a small sacrament of universal peace.

Remember the sublime music that moved you to tears, the dance that made you throw back your head and laugh out loud, the painting that touched your hidden passion, the possibility or the person that stole your heart. That is when you were experiencing the excitement we call God, revealed first in the small lover on straw who smiled at the star above him, and cried at the cross he glimpsed beneath it.

Too often, at Christmas, we perennially miss the real magic – that in his subsequent death and Resurrection, the “baby Jesus” is, in fact, revealed to be the Cosmic Christ who flattens the hills of injustice and fills the valleys with hope, the heart, soul and saviour of God’s beloved and broken people, the mighty “firstborn of all Creation”; the pulsing being of all that lives. There is nothing infantile about the infant. Christmas is already Easter.

We look at the baby and sight trembles into insight, seeing is transformed by recognition. Advent grace is for attuning the senses of the soul to the rhythm of God’s heart in every heartbeat. The poets know this. Gerard Manley Hopkins reminds us of “the face behind the face”; Kathleen Raine of “the mountain behind the mountain”; Seamus Heaney of “the horizon behind the horizon” and St Paul of “the energy behind all energies.” That’s the revealing language of the traditional “Catholic imagination”.

“The day of my spiritual awakening,” wrote Rhineland mystic Mechtild of Magdeburg, “was the day I saw – and knew I saw – all things in God and God in all things.” Incarnation is about recognising divine beauty – usually in deep disguise. Can you think of a time when you saw into the heart of a gesture, a passing event, any sensation – really and truly saw into it, through the lens of Christmas? In “The Snow Geese,” poet Mary Oliver tells of her sacramental glimpse into the mystery of the ordinary:

*One fall day I heard
above me, and above the sting of the wind, a sound
I did not know, and my look shot upward; it was
a flock of snow geese, winging it
faster than the ones we usually see,
and, being the colour of snow, catching the sun
so they were, in part at least, golden ...*

*I have never seen them again.
Maybe I will, someday, somewhere.
Maybe I won't.
It doesn't matter.
What matters
is that, when I saw them,
I saw them
as through the veil, secretly, joyfully, clearly.*