

## Christmas Eve/Day 2022

They say that when you have a young child, spiritual yearnings bubble up and you are more likely to go to church, or at least become more interested in the things it represents. That is especially true if you are a young mother.

New life certainly awakens something in us that goes beyond our otherwise materialistic obsessions. Perhaps that is why some feel closest to God when pottering in the garden or working with animals.

With my children growing up and preparing to fly the nest, I have recently been pondering the years of their early childhood. Everything seemed new, strange, exciting. We had no idea where the journey would take us or them. Yet amidst the inevitable chaos, I remember the sense of God being very close. This has coincided with my thinking about the Christmas story in the build-up to Christmas. Like a battering ram, it struck me that I am a Christian, not because of anything I've done, but because of a teenage girl living in Palestine in one of the most dangerous periods in history – and her having said 'yes' to God's unfathomable call for her to become the Mother of God in Jesus Christ. "Yes' to a call that would make her vulnerable to societal judgement. 'Yes', to a call that wouldn't guarantee her safety or her son's'.<sup>1</sup>

Mary's 'yes, isn't a 'yes' for a day, a fortnight, a year or even for the time it takes for Jesus to get through adolescence. It is a 'yes' that sees her cradling her baby in her arms in the manger and her dead son at the foot of the cross.

So much that we take for granted hinges in Mary's eternal 'yes'. Not just our Christian faith, but our notions of right and wrong, of justice and mercy, of compassion and joy. So many things that we take for granted today are a result of Jesus having come into the world, and Mary having consented to that happening.

When we look into the Christmas crib scene, what do we see? It's idyllic, isn't it? It's beautiful. It's safe. But of course, the real Christmas story was probably none of those things.

We see in the Gospel narratives about Jesus' birth that there is nothing pretty about the first Christmas. It has always been the concern of humans to discover where we can find God. As humans, we can only recognise spiritual things as they are presented in and through physical, material form.<sup>2</sup> There is no other way for us to comprehend it. We have to be able to see, hear, touch and smell it.

The mystery of Christmas is saying that God has chosen to reveal himself in normal material things. Most uniquely, in the person of Jesus. In the baby Jesus, we can touch, hear, see and smell God.

The story of Christmas doesn't implant us into the normal, pretty, middle-class, law-abiding safety of society. We will not find him in a bank account or petty red-tape

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Held Evans with Jeff Chu, *Wholehearted Faith* (New York: HarperOne, 2021), 3–5, 6.

<sup>2</sup> For a wider exploration see: Richard Rohr, "Christmas Mass 2015: The Great Embodiment," homily, December 25, 2015.

legislature. This God we see revealed in Jesus isn't to be found in the nice or the safe world, the cosy or the comfortable world. We find God where we least expect to look for him. We find him on the edge, in the struggle, in the places where we wouldn't choose to find him. We find him in the stable, with the cow muck, hunted from birth, chased by the authorities, homeless and eventually a refugee. And yet the shepherds still fall down in awe and wonder and the wise men still travel across the world to worship him and bring him gifts.

We talk of hope and Joy being the results of Christmas - if we can embrace and delight in the baby Jesus we will find joy - if we engage with the life Jesus shows us we will have hope. This is surely true. But we speak of these things as though they were delicate, pretty, comfortable and short-lived. They are not.

We seem to imagine they bring an end to all our troubles and struggles. They will not.

Hope and Joy grow out of the messiness of life. They have dirt on their face, blood in their knuckles, the grit of cobblestones in their hair and have just spat out a tooth as they rise for another go.<sup>3</sup>

They are the resolve of Ukrainians resisting the aggression of their Russian oppressors, the resilience of the single mum working a second job to feed the kids, the perseverance of the unemployed man humiliated by the 100th rejection of work, the fortitude of the nurse who has just been spat at in A & E and is now going to the foodbank because her wages will not cover all the bills, the endurance of the man homeless and on the streets because COVID lost him his job. The point of Jesus is that he is one of us in the ordinary, wherever we are. So, if we wish to meet him we will find him in the ordinary. In the ordinary struggles of life. In the everyday mess that we'd rather avoid.

And it all hinges on Mary's 'yes'. On Joseph's 'yes'. On the shepherds' 'yes'. On the wise men's 'yes'.

And the billion 'yesses' that have followed since. The 'yes' of the Apostles who build the church which Jesus inaugurated. The 'yes' of the early Church which sees Christianity spread around the world. The 'yes' of St Francis as he gives up his wealth to live a life of poverty so that he can better relate with the poor. The 'yes' of Mother Teresa as she says everyone should go to Calcutta and visit its backstreets because there you will find God. The 'yes' of all the wonderful people who have supported things in our Benefice churches, like the foodbank, community meals or any of our social action initiatives throughout the year. The 'yes' of you and me in deciding to accept God's offer to come together and meet him in word and sacrament today.

There is more to moving close to God who chooses to reveal himself in the ordinary than simply engaging with the struggles of the world. We remember the sacred and where to find him by our reverence. Just like the Shepherds come close and fall to

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<sup>3</sup> Facebook Meme, Author Unknown, 2022

their knees whilst the Angels sing, and the wise men bring incense and others gifts of devotion and kneel down to worship him.

This sacrament - the Eucharist, Mass, Communion – whatever you wish to call it, is God's free gift to us. In these elements of bread and wine, blessed and consecrated, God gives us Jesus. In these simple earthly materials God offers us Jesus' Body and Blood to feed and nourish us. It is a free invite to all. So what possible reason can you have to refuse it? What possible excuse can you have for saying no?

Every time the Eucharist is offered, you have a choice. That's the remarkable thing about our God who affords us freewill. Every Sunday, weekday or festival you have choice. You can say yes or no. But what could possibly be more important?

That is why Midnight Mass and Christmas Day Communion has been so important the world over. We come at Christmas to move close to the baby Jesus in the manger and to receive the sacramental risen Jesus in the Eucharist.

It is an offer God makes every Sunday, weekdays and festival throughout the year. Just like he offers you the chance to meet him in the ordinariness of everyday life. Is this the year you will respond with a 'yes'?

Amen