

God's Transforming Love



Recently I took the above photos of some trees near our house. The one on the left was taken on a cloudy day with little or no direct sunlight. The other was taken just before sunset, when, for a brief moment, the trees were illuminated and transformed by the sun, taking on a golden colour.

We can sometimes feel a bit like the darker picture, depressed, anxious and unconnected. For nearly two years we have been struggling to obey the ever-changing restrictions put in place by worried governments trying to control the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Some people have become frustrated and angry at this uncertain way of living, and public protests have taken place.

What is going on in our world, we might ask? Where is God? We are all tired of wearing masks, distancing ourselves from one another, and being tested and vaccinated. If we make plans, they often need to be altered. In addition, and increasing our stress level, there are the dire warnings of how Climate Change is already affecting our world.

In this sort of environment, how can we celebrate Christmas in a meaningful and joyful way? Can we be helped by the memory of God, who out of love

came to live among us and wishes to transform us and the amazing world we live in?

When we examine the 1st century Palestinian context in which Joseph and Mary lived and Jesus was born, we find it has some similarities to our own. Mary may have planned to give birth to her baby at home, with family members and friends around her, caring for her and rejoicing with her. But it did not happen like that. Instead, she and Joseph had to obey a decree issued by the Roman Emperor Augustus to travel to Bethlehem, Joseph's home-town, to be registered in a census.

For Mary, saying "Yes" to God's invitation to assist in God's great plan for the world, brought her not just joy and wonder, but also suffering. First there was the big upset when Joseph learnt she was pregnant. Then a decision had to be made about her planned marriage, and how could she explain what was happening, to those who judged her as having participated in a shameful act? Luke redeems these anxieties a little, by describing Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth, someone who could understand, comfort and reassure her. For Elizabeth, it was also a time of receiving affirmation concerning her own surprising pregnancy.

Mary and Joseph were late arriving in Bethlehem, resulting in the birth of Jesus taking place in a shelter for animals. Certainly not what they imagined or desired!

After Jesus had been born, Mary might have wondered what would happen next. Did she see the glory of God in her small vulnerable new-born baby lying in an animal's feeding trough? He was special to her, but no relatives were there to support her and agree with her. How could such a birth be validated as special?

In the town of Bethlehem, life would have continued as usual, with people enjoying the company of relatives they had not seen for some time, eating and drinking, and settling down to sleep. What was happening in a stable was of little interest to them, but it did become important to a small group of men, strangers, of a low social status.

These shepherds were not in the temple in Jerusalem worshipping God, but

out in a paddock watching their sheep, when, to their amazement, an angel appeared and spoke to them. Although at first terrified, they responded to God's message, left their sheep and entered Bethlehem where they found and worshipped the infant Jesus. They became so thrilled and excited about all that had happened and was happening to them, they had to tell Joseph, Mary and everyone they met!

When we reflect on that first Christmas, we realize that although God organized it and was present in it, everything did not unfold easily or smoothly. God invited ordinary people to be involved in the plan, but when Mary, and then Joseph, agreed, their lives became difficult and complicated. Mary had to travel when advanced in her pregnancy, and they were homeless at the time of Jesus' birth. Finally, God chose a group of shepherds, strangers, to be the ones who first saw and affirmed for Joseph and Mary the glory of God in Jesus' birth. Perhaps this Christmas, with all the uncertainty in our world and the Church's low social status, God is inviting us, weak, stumbling and sometimes exhausted human beings, to see and rejoice in the glory of God. This will happen not only hidden in a stable, but in other dark places where we find ourselves. For us it might be in loneliness, rejection, disappointment, sickness, or being among strangers. Then, like the shepherds, can we rejoice to assist in God's work of transforming love, by affirming and illuminating the reality of God's presence with us, in us, and in all creation today?

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