

# Receiving and Giving



The three hens above are enjoying their daily dust baths. First they scratch in an area where the soil is soft, and then scrape the soil up into their feathers and around their bodies. Next, they relax for a while. If I call them when they are thus engaged, I will be ignored. Eventually they stand up and shake themselves causing dirt to fly in all directions. In this way they rid themselves of any unwanted insects and other small foreign bodies. Then, feeling renewed, they move on.

I see some connection between this part of the lives of hens and the observing of Advent. (I have a reasonably good imagination!) The Advent Season, beginning on the fourth Sunday before Christmas, is usually understood as a time of preparation for the celebration of the coming of Jesus as a baby born in our world. This preparation time is often lost in Christmas and end of year gatherings, but it could be used to make space in our lives to receive Jesus, the vulnerable Christ Child, and take him with us in new ways to new places, and perhaps then discover that he is already there.

For Mary and Joseph, the time just before the birth of Jesus was one of change. First, leaving home and travelling to Bethlehem, then moving from one way of life, to another dominated by a baby. To travel to Bethlehem at this point in their lives was definitely not what they would have chosen, but they went. They could take only what was necessary. On arrival, there was the problem of accommodation. What was available was not ideal, but it was satisfactory. There in the quiet they welcomed a possibly noisy, and certainly needy, baby Jesus into their lives.

In many ways the arrival of this baby was surrounded by mystery, and pain and

pleasure existed together. Mary and Joseph had no friends or relatives to help them. Unknown visitors arrived, shepherds, and later, wise men. Then there was a sudden flight to safety in Egypt, to avoid King Herod's order to kill boy babies in or near Bethlehem.

What has this to say to us? First, that life for Mary and Joseph, and for us today, is not always ideal, but it does have potential and amazing possibilities. When we reflect on the Christmas season in Australia, we find that in our culture it seems to start in November with advertisements for exotic food, gifts and decorations, as well as Santa Clauses appearing in shops. There is little obvious connection with the birth of Jesus. We may criticise such activities, or try to ignore them until closer to Christmas Day. Instead, this year, what if in Advent we engage positively with these happenings, and as members of the Body of Christ, embodying Christ, bring the Christ Child to birth in new ways and places?

I suggest that during Advent, once a week, or more frequently, we might stop and spend some time alone, among nature, in our house or wherever we choose. There, let the things that are dominating our minds, words we regret saying, anxieties, activities we need to do, etc. gradually fall away so we can be open to hear God speaking to us. (We become a bit like the hens resting in their dirt baths!) We may ask ourselves what is really important to us in our lives? Is it our relationship with a loving God, whose love surrounds us and dwells in us? If so, can we be aware of God's presence and give thanks?

This quiet time may not last very long before we are drawn to share God's love with others by praying for them, and wanting to work for their well-being. Eventually, like the hens ending their dust bath, we can give ourselves a good shake, removing what needs to go and/or is forgiven, and prepare for a new beginning embodying and birthing Christ in a new place. It is the nature of God's love, shown in Jesus' birth, to enter and grow in our world, and in us, in this way.

At this point, if we look around us, we might notice that acts of love are being shown by people who are not necessarily Christians, but care about others who are marginalized or suffering in some way, and children who may miss out on receiving presents at Christmas. Perhaps by offering to contribute to Christmas hampers for the needy or to help deliver them, we may end up enabling or assisting 'shepherds', or ourselves, to meet the vulnerable Christ Child.

This Advent, instead of just preparing to celebrate Mary's birth of Jesus in our homes and Churches with family and friends, we might also serve and recognise the presence of the Christ Child in unfamiliar places and in our meetings with strangers. By so doing, we may discover that we are

experiencing a mutual receiving and giving of God's love and life in our daily lives, and not just, for example, when we receive Holy Communion at a Church Service.

May the celebration of the birth of Jesus this year be for us a time of deepening our love for God and others, by discerning the Christ Child being incarnated in us and in the world in new and unexpected ways and places. This will happen through others, and also through ourselves.

*Sister Helen CSC  
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