

Gift or Interruption?



A few weeks ago I was filling a bucket with grain in the shed adjoining my fowl houses, and happened to look up—into the eyes of a Brushtail possum! It was sitting on a shelf above the feed bins with its tail curled around its body. Being nocturnal, it had no intention of moving until it was dark. I took its photo. Next morning it was gone.

How was I to understand such a visit? Was it a gift to see a member of God's creation who lived close by in the trees but was seldom visible to me? Or was the possum an unwanted interruption to my day that I could choose to ignore, hoping it would soon go away and cause me no problems?

Christmas comes each year and people respond to it in different ways. It might be a time when we are somewhat irritated by being confronted

with 'Santas' and advertisements urging us to purchase Christmas gifts as early as November! Or perhaps it is for us a painful interruption in our lives that we try to avoid, and long to be over?

Christmas, for Christians, is a season we are invited to approach reverently as we consider the wonder of God coming as a baby into our world, and who continues to come to us as a vulnerable presence in unexpected places. In Advent, the weeks before Christmas, we may have been preparing not just for Christmas Dinner, but to receive gratefully the gift of Christ into our lives in a fresh way.

Birth involves pain and suffering, and the story of Jesus' birth is no different. Joseph and a shamed, heavily pregnant Mary, we are told, journeyed from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a distance of 156 kilometres. It would take 4-5 days to walk, but for Joseph and Mary it probably took longer. When they eventually arrived at Bethlehem, the only accommodation available that might have provided an exhausted Mary with some privacy and protection, was a place usually occupied by animals, perhaps a cave. Very likely a woman from the nearby inn came to help Mary give birth to her first born.

We can imagine most of the guests in the inn eating, drinking or settling down for a night's sleep. They had no idea that a child, God's Son, was being born that night. But, had he not already come secretly nine months earlier when only Mary knew? God's presence was now visible to the small group who had cleaned up, and were resting in the semi-darkness to marvel and ponder at the birth of Jesus.

For some people, Christmas is full of painful memories. They want to be alone, but where can they go? The beaches are crowded with people and even the bush is invaded unless they know of a hidden suitable place. There is always their own house or garden, but well-meaning visitors may call. They seek to be where they can lower protective barriers, weep and place their vulnerable selves in God's presence, allowing God's love to enfold them in their grief. The God who holds them, knows and shares in their pain, darkness and solitude. They are welcomed to rest in God's overwhelming love for them.

God's love is also present in the joy people experience by being with family and friends at Christmas, perhaps some whom they have not seen for a while. The vulnerable Jesus is with them as they express their love for each other and share treasured personal stories.

Christians attending Christmas services, gather to remember the story of Christmas, that affects everyone in some way. Worshipping God at Christmas includes singing familiar carols, being reminded of Mary, Joseph, the birth of Jesus, visiting shepherds and later the arrival of foreign wise men. It is also a time when we experience God coming to us in our vulnerability and weakness - a quiet bodily coming in Bread and Wine, in Holy Communion.

Jesus comes to us daily, in light and dark places, but at certain times he comes as an unexpected gift of great love. We can open ourselves to receive his presence and love, or turn away in pain, fear or ignorance. Jesus is always there for us, but does not force his love on us.

The possum stayed in the shed near my hens, quiet and visible, until night came. Then it disappeared. It is not far away, probably in one of the many surrounding Gum trees. The possum's visit was an unexpected interruption, and also a gift, reminding me of its hidden presence and that of God at Christmas.

I am grateful for Jesus' presence with me and in me. At Christmas I experience his presence as vulnerable, sometimes painful and interrupting, yet always as an amazing loving gift, offered to me regardless of anything and everything. May we, as followers and bearers of Jesus, offer such a vulnerable loving gift to others - in light and in darkness.

*Sister Helen CSC
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