

Wonder and Awe!

Mary held the shepherds' unexpected visit and their message within her, and reflected on what it might mean.

We are invited to join Joseph, Mary and the shepherds at the manger, and pause... Perhaps we are tired and worried after preparing for visitors, family members and others. Have we enough food for everyone, did we buy the right presents, has everyone been remembered? Or are we facing another Christmas alone, grieving for loved ones and longing for it all to be over? We look around at our world with its increasing number of refugees, fear and violence. Can the nativity scene speak to us today?

As the Holy Family holds and encompasses us, we are invited to pour out all our pain, grief, emptiness and tiredness of the past year, along with thankfulness for the care, compassion and love we have received. God, Jesus, became one of us, living and dying in love for us that we might live in God's love for ever. Can the manger feed and nurture us, become an unexpected place of resurrection life for us?

We think again of the face of a child gazing in wonder at coloured lights; can that same wonder and awe enter deep within our hearts and be reflected in our faces, as we accept God's loving presence choosing to share all the pain and joy of our life this Christmas?

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At this time of the year, reminders of the approaching Christmas festival are everywhere, in streets, in shops, on the television. There are coloured lights decorating houses and trees, Santa pictured riding in a sleigh pulled by reindeers, and advertisements urging us to purchase presents, and share sumptuous meals with friends and family.

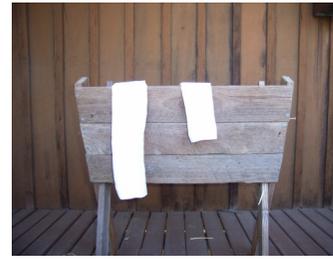
I see all this and have trouble connecting it to God, who out of love, chose to be born as a human baby in poor circumstances two thousand years ago. Then I notice the wonder and awe on a small child's face as he or she is transfixed by spectacular decorations, or is given a very special present. A similar wonder and awe is often shown in the faces of Joseph, Mary and the shepherds in nativity scenes gazing at the small vulnerable baby in the manger.

Can wonder and awe be a connecting link? If we consider the shepherds, they must have seen plenty of new born

babies—and lambs! What was so different about this baby to cause their look of wonder?

Was it the appearance of angels, their singing, or the message they were given? In this case, surely it was something of a let down for them to find an ordinary human baby lying in an animal's feeding trough in a shed. The parents, who were obviously travellers, looked tired and relatively poor. Yet Luke declares that the shepherds left “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen”.

The Christmas event, of God coming to live among us, is, in a way, not all that different from the life experienced by most people. It was mingled with pain, shame, grief, rejection, weariness, and disappointment, as well as joy and thanksgiving. Mary mysteriously pregnant, Joseph disappointed and shamed, but in the end accepting her and the baby. A journey commanded by Roman authorities and made just prior to the birth was not easy, and ended with the difficulty of finding accommodation. If this baby was so special to God, why did it all have to be so hard? Was Mary's and Joseph's joy and thanksgiving over the safe arrival of the baby enough to rise above the troubles they had experienced and allow the wonder of God's presence to shine out? Or did their anxiety, fear and sheer weariness prevent it?



God, vulnerable through love, was present with these tired, hurting, homeless travellers resting in a shed or cave. The birth of Jesus was a gift of love to them and all people.

If we turn to the story of the nativity in Luke's Gospel 2:7, New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson has suggested that Luke may have made a deliberate link between the birth of Jesus and his death. Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, “wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn”. In Luke 23:53, Joseph of Arimathea took the body of Jesus from the cross, “wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid.”

Birth and death became times of new life for Jesus, as they can be for us. Both events bring together suffering and joy. For Jesus, both happened on the outskirts of a town, first Bethlehem, then Jerusalem, in an in-between liminal place open to all, where unexpected changes occur...

The shepherds were out in the fields watching the sheep. Doing a labouring job reckoned at the time as one of the lowest. God chose these people to be first to visit Jesus and to publicly announce the birth of the Saviour.