

Trust in the Slow Work of God

In the beginning was the Word ... through him all things came to be.

The Word became flesh and lived among us.

“To all who did believe in him he gave the power to become children of God.”

To get full value out of the celebration of Christmas we have to make the act of faith that it really is true. **Some-how** the eternal God, the infinite, the all-powerful, took on humanity in the baby Jesus, became one of us. Humanity was thereby changed; our shared humanity was changed; WE can say, especially if we have been baptised, we have been changed into an altogether new creature in Christ.

That sounds very ‘full-on’; when you totally get how awesome the Christmas story is, God is going to become everything for you. However, as we are all only on our way rather than fully formed it might seem a bit too much.

And so; What strikes me most forcibly this year as I reflect on Christmas is that salvation is a process just like the life of Jesus was a process.

Tonight we see the new born baby in the manger; it started before that; he was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mary carried him as he grew over the nine months in her womb; she brought him into the world; then the journey began of growth from being a baby into a boy and then into a man; Mary and Joseph and his grandparents and God knows who else played a part in helping him because he had to grow. The GOD MAN had to grow. Imagine God-made-man growing, developing, not just physically, but mentally, emotionally and morally – in the sense that he learned how to be good at each stage of his life.

He had to struggle. He didn’t have to contend with sin in his own heart the way we do; but he certainly had to struggle with the sin of the world; we know for sure that it got him in the end, physically; it literally beat him to death.

We cannot sidestep the struggle but I don’t want to emphasise struggle today; rather I want to emphasize the process. God-made-man had to grow up. It took thirty years before he was ready to face into what we think of as his life’s work; but it was all his life’s work.

If the life of God made man was a process, so too then, is my life and yours, especially our lives of faith.

When we confront ourselves with the truth that I articulated earlier; **‘if we have been baptised, we have been changed into an altogether new creature in Christ’** it can scare us off rather than attract us.

At any particular stage of my faith journey I might be tempted to say; this is just too ambitious, too high flown; I am so far off the mark that I am not even in the game; therefore, it's not true at all - i.e. this whole thing about humanity being raised to a whole new level of 'new life in Christ' – or at least it's not true, not relevant **for me**.

Our faith lives are a process and, where it really matters, they are the work of God more than our work.

I want to share with you something that a French Jesuit theologian cum scientist, called Teilhard de Chardin wrote about *The Slow Work of God*.

He was a stretcher bearer in the First World War and he wrote these words to his cousin Marguerite who must have been struggling with some uncertainty or imperfection in her life at the time. He wrote:

Above all, trust in the slow work of God
We are quite naturally impatient in everything
to reach the end without delay
We should like to skip the intermediate stages.
We are impatient of being on the way to something
unknown, something new. And yet it is the law of all progress
that it is made by passing through some stages of instability-
and that it may take a very long time. And so I think it is with you.
your ideas mature gradually – let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste. Don't try to force them on, as
though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances
acting on your own good will)
will make of you tomorrow. Only God could say what this new spirit gradually
forming within you will be. Give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is
leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete. (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. 1881-1955)

Our lives are a process; it is not a total surprise that we are not the finished article yet; you may feel that you are stalled; or that you haven't got properly started yet, or even that you have been going backwards.

The deepest wonder of the Christian story is that Salvation is, above all, a gift of a God who is so eager and generous that he does all the heavy lifting himself. We are never forgotten, never totally out of the picture even though we might behave as if we are; there is always reconciliation; always the sacrament of reconciliation; we can always begin again and find once more that we are part of the slow work of God.

“Give Our Lord the benefit of believing that his hand is leading you, and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself in suspense and incomplete.”