

# The Gift that is God

## A Meditation for Advent

Sarah Burrow

Every year the reading of the great Prologue to John's Gospel at Midnight Mass is a climatic point to all the interior wrestling that Advent so often brings, as we seek to prepare ourselves to be open to receive the incarnation anew in our lives.

Some years ago I was fortunate to visit the Holy Land Institute for the Deaf in Jordan where my friend Elizabeth worked in a specialized unit for children who are blind as well as deaf. As I walked through the doors I entered a different world, a wordless world, a world where trust has to be painstakingly forged; a world of dependency and of hard-won independence, a world of touch, but above all a world of love.

When I first entered the unit I was disorientated. The life, social rules, the expectations were quite different than those from the other side of the door that I'd just come through. First Mohammed aged 11 came up to me and smelt me. When he didn't recognise me that way he gently felt me all over, my face first, my hands, my arms, my body. His exploration had felt totally unobtrusive, rather a meeting point, the first step towards trust. Senior girls helped members of staff. All of them came in, picked up the children, cuddled them, kissed them, and held them. This unselfconscious love is an abiding memory.

Since that visit I have pondered the concept of Word. 'In the beginning was the Word.' We, with language, struggle to comprehend. How do these words, so much a part of the fabric of our faith, begin to relate to those who have no facility for language?

Over time, I have come to understand that these vulnerable children receive the Word in two ways, and in so receiving it they can remind us how to receive the gift too, the gift that is God, the reality that is at the heart of Christmas.

Substitute the word Word with love. 'In the beginning was love and love was with God and love was God.<sup>1</sup>' Going back to the children I think that they experience the Word or love in two ways. First through the care, love, commitment and the sacrifices made by others on their behalf.

Touch is the most important sense for blind and deaf children, and in the unit the children were constantly being held, cuddled, guided and restrained, and were being taught hand over hand signing.

There is a second way these children can come to know the Word, and that is surely through their inner being, through that still place within. The place where there is no need for words. What freedom that must give. God's own sheer gift of himself that no barrier can withstand. The place where the presence of God transcends all words, all language. The place where we know and are known by God. The place that Thomas Merton sought. The place we seek day by day.

I observed it in Mohammed, taking himself outside just before bed to take a sniff of the air, to feel what the weather was doing. I saw it in six year old Nur, so relaxed and content in Elizabeth's arms. I found it in Basheer, a moment of sheer exuberance and joy in his bath, after a time of desperate frustration and rage.

In turn these vulnerable children act as instruments of God's love, reminding us that life is transformed, that community is built up through living lives that embrace the weak and frail, the old and sick, the different and the excluded. They act as witnesses of how we can cross the boundaries of difference and disorder, and prompt us to return to the words of Christ: 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.' They become examples to us -through their inability to speak words - of our need for silence, wordless union with God.

'And the Word became flesh and lived among us.' God became human to show us how to become truly human. To become truly human is to love and be loved.

I end this reflection for Advent with a brief story from another continent, one that, towards the end of his life, had such an impact on Merton.

Aged 23 I taught in India. It was a seminal experience. I was on a train travelling through an enormous slum area of Mumbai. As far as I could see were shacks, made from cardboard, bits of corrugated iron, rags, string. There had been rain, so the ground was covered in debris, excrement, vegetable matter, rubbish, and filthy water. It was a scene of degradation and despair. Into that scene I watched an emaciated man standing barefooted in the muck holding above his head his baby and gently turned him. It is a moment I will never forget. The world stood still.

A picture etched in  
my mind. Of slum squalor, filth  
pain, destitution.  
And yet, momentarily  
transformed. Loved baby held high.

As we approach Advent, with all the terror and despair in the world, let us be open to glimpses of God in the unexpected; a sense of the eternal breaking into our brokenness; so that we can become a part of the transforming work of God in His beautiful yet fragile world.

**Sarah Burrow** was a parish priest until the beginning of this year when she chose to change direction: to come to live and work in and for a religious community, with particular brief to undertake spiritual direction, to lead quiet days and retreats both in the community and elsewhere. She enjoys walking, music and woodcarving.

### Jean Lamb — 2016 Conference Artist

Jean Lamb was awarded a BA Honours in Fine Art from Reading University in 1979, the Oxford University Certificate of Theology in 1984, and a MA in Fine Art from Nottingham Trent University in 1988. She is an Associate Priest living and practising in Nottingham.

*As an artist working in and alongside the Church, I explore through paint and wood, the spiritual understandings which undergird our faith in the God who reaches out to us all in our common humanity.*

The cover image is of her sculpture, **Presentation**, Oil on sycamore wood, 36" x 18" x 18".

*Presentation (1993): a mother presents/offers her new born baby to the world. Both are naked, reminding us of the very act of birth and the moments thereafter, when the precious gift of love becomes a separate human being. The child is held before the mother's mouth as her breath releases the Logos, God's reconfiguration of the Spirit of Creation, like the parting waters of Creation forming the new earth.*

*Here the Logos is given to us that we might also hold him, in thankfulness to God, yet also appreciative for the mother's willing sacrifice of her mind and body, her heart and her very soul.*

For further details of the artist's work see: <http://www.jeanlamb.com>