

Preparation

The first person I ever knew who had a baby was Sandy. She and her family lived at the other end of the street from me and we had been friends for years. She got pregnant while still young and at home, but the dad was very much part of the deal and they were in love. It was quite an eye-opener for me to watch a whole family, as well as a couple, prepare for the birth.

You who have had babies will know of the nine-month count down and the nine-month expansion of body that goes with it. It is like setting something in motion which cannot be stopped, even if it sometimes can seem unbelievable.

Advent has this sense of time running down about it. We don't get the full nine months of the pregnancy, we have it compressed into four weeks. Four weeks to get decorated, four weeks to get the cards and presents in the mail, four weeks to wonder what on earth I can get Lucy for a decent Christmas present, four weeks to prepare for all our children to be home, four weeks to plan for a great Christmas service. But more importantly, four weeks to let my heart and my head prepare to be still, make space, to be ready for a miracle.

At Sandy's house they set up a little apartment for her new family to live in with some privacy. They got baby clothes and equipment ready. Her friends, me included, were a bit befuddled and didn't quite know what to do, so we hung around trying to be helpful. Sandy, meanwhile, seemed to retreat into herself a little. She would sit sometimes, just holding that big round belly, and her focus was off somewhere else. I remember how she would be in the midst of us, chatting, and then I would notice that she had "left" us and was somewhere else.

It was as if her parents were like the John the Baptist figure. They were doing all the hard work of leveling the mountains and filling in the valleys. They were re-arranging rooms, plumbing, furniture and stuff like that.

As we get ready for Christmas there is a John the Baptist side of it too. You have to get the presents and the cards. You have to get ready for family, if they are visiting. You should have lights up, and a tree and all that jazz. It is important to have the valleys, hills and crooked places made smooth and easy for the Christmas season to work well. Who wants to run out of stuffing half way through serving? Who wants to realise they have forgotten to get their wife a Christmas present?

But there is a bit more to it than that.

There is being Mary, in the way Sandy taught me.

We need to hold that big round belly, and let our focus move off somewhere else.

Birth is not about a new stroller, or a crib or a bedroom. It is about a new life. It is about a helpless person who needs you and will change your life for ever.

For us Christians Christmas is about God. But oddly not the God we think of usually. It is God, all soft and helpless and tiny. It is about God who cannot speak, or crawl, or survive without help. It is about God being utterly dependant on your attention and your long-term commitment. It is about a God who seems to say, "I cannot survive without you. I will need you for 20 years or more, and even after that I will need you"

The “pondering”. I think that is the word for what Sandy was doing when she drifted off. The pondering of Christmas is about becoming ready for a God who needs you.
God needs you.

It sounds so alien to us. We think of God as the big parental figure to whom we, his children, can always turn for back-up, rescue, guidance, support. But every moment of the Christ’s life show us an eternal truth about God. Christmas, the birth of God in a wet, bendy, utterly helpless baby, tells us an eternal truth about God and us.

God needs you to hold him, to care for him, to love him, and to offer him your life. Just as a mother offers her life for her child, not sacrificially, but as a knowing that she will never be the same.

I think of my own mother, and maybe of yours too. Think how she set aside her own agenda, her own sleep pattern, her own identity, her own future to have you, to hold you, raise you, love you, to make you ready for the world. All of us have mothers, even imperfect and faulted, this is still true of them.

Pondering is a thing you do quietly, a little withdrawn from the rush and business. Sandy would just slip there, without fuss, and ponder. She was holding a mystery in her heart and a baby in her belly.

As Christmas comes we need to slip aside from John the Baptist readiness-making and hyper activity. We need to sit by the half decorated tree, let it be for a while, and pray. Ponder. Wonder. Be present, without thinking or problem-solving. Just be with the God who wants to be born in us. The God who says, “I need you. I cannot do this without you.”

Do you understand that God does need you?

Do you deeply know that God has made himself vulnerable, weak and fragile?

Do you know that God has made plans that cannot be completed without you?

Each of us, as Christians at Christmas, need to ponder, pray, meditate on this trusting of God in us. He places himself in our care.

When we come to communion and make a cradle of our hands, and the host, the body of Christ, is placed in that cradle, what else does this mean? He entrusts himself to us.

We are Christ-carriers. Just as Sandy was carrying a person, and adult-in-waiting, in her womb. We who claim the name of Christian are carriers of Christ in our world, in our families, at work, on the street, and also in our Church.

This teaching is hard because it is easier to think it is up to God and all we have to do is beg and plead or ask nicely. No, it is God who has asked nicely, and it is us who have said “Yes”. As Mary said “Yes”, and Sandy said “Yes”, and as I told you last week, I said “Yes”.

We are called to bring Christ to birth, “to bring into the world” is how the French say Birth.

And so we need to ponder, pray and step aside so we do not forget why we decorate and cook and party. So we are awed again, as were the shepherds and the children, and so we become still, and quiet and radiant.

Let your heart say Yes to the One who seeks you to hold him, and carry him, to bring him into the world, and walk with him for ever.