

CHILDREN OF GRACE IN THE YEAR OF GRACE

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This year the Australian Church celebrates a 'Year of Grace'. It has been an opportunity for the renewal of faith in the ever present possibilities that God's gifts place before us.

As a community of grace, our identity as Church depends on our receptivity to the self-offering of God in the life of Christ, a life 'poured out' on the Cross, embodied in the Resurrection, communicated in the Spirit at Pentecost and received in the gift of the Eucharist. Grace brings us into an encounter with this very life and friendship of God, present not outside of human history but active within it, drawing us by need and desire to himself.

Our year of grace commenced a few days earlier than that of the Australian Church with the arrival of our first child, a baby boy. The Chinese name we chose, in addition to his English name, was 'Beng Sim' which means, roughly, 'bright, clear heart'. It was the ancient Fathers who first employed the 'heart' as a metaphor for our spiritual identity, for our remembrance of God in our personal depths. In the pages of the *Philokalia*, it is sobriety of heart that leads to a clear vision of God.

Like all advents, the arrival of our son followed a time of acute and wholehearted expectation. There was the anticipation of becoming parents for the first time, the natural anxieties of pregnancy, the minutiae of preparation but then the relief and joy of hearing our baby's first cry, the countless discoveries of early parenthood, the tremendous support and enthusiasm of family and friends.

Ten weeks on and the joy of parenting has not left us, even if the hours of sleep are few, and we have been humbled and reshaped by the gratuity of God's creation with which we have been entrusted.

Intertwined with our own journey were those of others. We were privileged to hear the stories of expectant couples who had endured long and arduous struggles to conceive, testimonies which made us all the more grateful for the ease of our own experience.

The memories of our own parents also surfaced as they shared in our joy and reflected back on their own motherhood and fatherhood, in a different time and in a much different world. Then there was the Lutheran midwife, a pastor's daughter, who showed us tremendous care in the maternity ward and became a genuine presence of faith and companionship along the way.

The joy of our son's arrival was increased by the news that our close friends, who were also expecting, had given birth the very same day to their third child, a daughter. It was a time of grace and elation.

So much sharper was the shock then to be sitting outside the very same birth unit only ten days later, praying for the health of our friends' daughter who had now developed a catastrophic infection. It was devastating news and so keenly felt. There at the ward to be godfather, I was honoured to be present as their beautiful daughter was baptised and blessed.

The seriousness of the situation would become clearer throughout the night. Home safe with our newborn, we kept vigil in fear and hope, holding our son close and sharing the pain and unbelievability of all that was unfolding. It was mid-morning when the news came that our friends had lost their daughter, all too quickly and all too soon. We were shattered and remain so.

No words can honour the experience of these past few weeks. We continue to hold our friends in love and prayer, and we are with them in faith and in grief. The preciousness of life has come home to us and there is no longer any hint of complacency in our lives. We know too well, with joy and pain, the absolute importance of life and hold our son with the greatest humility and tenderness.

A few Sundays ago our baby boy was baptised. Our close friends were his godparents, a role they have embraced with a love and generosity that speaks of their graciousness. We cannot put to the side the loss that is felt across our hearts and we would never seek to. Our friends and their daughter are too important for that.

As we prayed the litany of saints to strengthen and guide our newborn son, we did not hesitate to ask for their daughter's intercession and were drawn closer to God in the knowledge that beyond the limits of time and history, and in the light of the Resurrection, he continues to pour out his grace on his children.