

THE INVITATION OF CHRISTMAS

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As the Church enters into the depths of Christmas, which is God's entry into the depth of humanity, we hear the call to 'stay awake' in expectation and longing. We anticipate with hope the birth of Jesus, the man who is God, in the city of Bethlehem to a woman named Mary. Our Advent readings, however, draw our expectation not only to the beginnings of our story but also to its consummation. We hear that we are to make preparations for the Son of God who will come again in glory and bring the history of the world to its fulfilment in bringing himself.

As the German theologian Karl Rahner observed, we should not be so surprised that we as Christians proclaim this dramatic conclusion of the world ahead of Christmas because it is precisely from the perspective of the end of a story that the meaning of humble beginnings can be understood. It is in the light of the fullness of time that the ultimate significance of the birth of Jesus, in the straw of a manger, in the time of Herod, can be recognised with the eyes of faith. It is from the perspective of eternity that the meaning of that historical moment, in all its contingency and particularity, is revealed to us anew. God has indeed walked the pathways of our life. He has not simply entered into sympathy with our human existence but literally lived it, been born into it, so that we might follow him in the fabric of our own.

A common lament of our faith is that the significance and transcendent newness of this birth struggles for recognition in a culture where other stories threaten to overtake, even undermine, the revelatory meaning and consequence of Christmas. That God's eternal Word became flesh in Jesus Christ, that God made it possible for us to experience him in the man Jesus of Nazareth, and that this same person calls us to himself, now and forever, can be lost in the ring of cash registers and the urgency of our plans.

However, this need not be so. Christmas has not passed us by and it remains available to us, not as a mere looking back to something past or the re-telling of a story that is finished and locked away in another age, but our entry into his *one* coming which is still in progress at the present time.

This Son of Man, this Jesus the Christ who is the principle of our life and the centre of God's plan and grace, this person who is the blessedness of God himself and who has been born definitively into our presence and into our history and future, calls us close to him so that in him we can begin to discover our true face.

With the arrival of this child arrives our call to authenticity, the call to put aside our justifications and secret ambitions, the precarious architecture that fills our lives, even our Church, with clichés, artificiality and routine behaviours, to raise our heads and look into the countenance of the One who is our life, who is both the way and our destination, and to begin to truly live in him. In short, the birth of this man is the birth of our selves; the birth of his humanity is the birth of ours, if only we allow it to be, not only in principle but in fact.

In the second century, St Irenaeus pointed to the radical originality and interruptive character of the Incarnation, affirming “He brought total newness by bringing himself”. For the Church Fathers, the birth of Jesus was not to be seen as one moment in the continuum of history, passing like the others, or a provisional novelty that would give way to some other intervention, but the genuine second genesis in the history of the world.

The birth of this man-who-is-God announces a new creation, *our* new creation, and he comes as the concrete ‘pledge’ that union between the divine and human is not only possible but the one and total purpose of our existence.

This Christmas an interior renewal beckons each one of us. As people of faith and as a community of faith, as a Church, the invitation is to make ‘room in the inn’ for the unique reality of His person. In Christ, God is where we are and this says everything about God and everything about our human vocation. “All things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17); all things have become new in Him.