

“And we have beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth...for the law came by Moses but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” John 1:14

“The Law” was and still is a very important feature of our religion. In Hebrew it is “Torah” which means a jewel. The precious gift that God gives to his people to help them order their lives according to his mind. But the gift is incomplete. It is both gracious and truthful but not complete in its grace and truth.

There is, in John’s mind, something in the person of Jesus Christ which fills out or completes or somehow finishes God’s revelation of himself. What God wants us to understand about him. He no longer described grace and truth in words. He embodies grace and truth in a person. And he first embodies grace and truth as a little child. He shows us that there is a certain grace and truth in God which finds its most truthful expression in the form of a baby. That being helpless and dependent is, in some ways, what God is like.

Of course, as Jesus grows he reveals other aspects of God’s nature- although, apart from the incident in the Temple where he debates with the rabbis, there is only a single half verse about the time covered between being a baby and being a fully developed adult.

But when he was a baby, Mary holds out her finger and God’s hand closes around it. In our hardness we will not lift our hands to pull down the love of God, so he lifts his hand to pull down human compassion onto his cradle.

And so the weakness of God proves stronger than men; for this is how he brings his love to bear on human arrogance; by weakness and not by strength. By need and not by pride. And when he eventually leaves this world thirty three years later, he leaves behind what we might call the “stand ins” or the “proxies” of his weakness- the little and the needy, for he said “ He who receives such a child receives me” and “As you have done to the least of these my brothers and sisters you have done unto me”

I’m sure many of you have been to the Christmas market in Belfast at some time or another. You might even have missed it this year (although there are only so many kangaroo burgers and Dutch pancakes that a person can eat). You may have seen the stall which is run by Bulgarian Orthodox nuns. You may even have bought some decorations for your Christmas tree there.

But as you will know the other thing that all of the Orthodox Churches are famous for and which are also sold at that stall in the Christmas market, are icons. And not surprisingly, given the time of year that the market is open, many are of the Virgin and Child.

Very often icons don’t mean much to us. They’ve not really had a part in Church of Ireland spirituality. There are probably good reasons for that, but some of them are very interesting and instructive. They aren’t meant to what we would call “realistic” representations. They’re very stylised and there are strict rules which are followed in “writing” and icon.

There is one “style” of icon which is known as the Elousa or “Virgin of the Lovingkindness”. It is very moving to look at. In it the child Jesus embraces his mother cheek to cheek, his arm around her neck and he is pushing himself up against her body- climbing on her the way babies do. Often there is a text from the Song of Songs painted in the background “His left hand is beneath my head and with his right hand he embraces me” (Cantica 2:6)

Jesus eyes are fixed on his mother but, as with most icons, Mary is looking at us and her left hand gestures towards her baby- she is showing us something about him. She is telling us about the eagerness of God’s love for us.

If we begin, as most of us do, with a notion that God stands at a distance from us, waiting for us to make a move in his direction, this image comes as a shock. The Lord does not wait, hanging around as we babble on about our shame and penitence, trying to persuade him that we are worth

forgiving. His love, instead, is like that of a boisterous child grabbing armfuls of his mother's clothing with that extraordinary hunger for sheer physical closeness that babies have.

This is a picture of God in Jesus Christ who cannot bear to be separated from human beings and human love. He is positively shameless in his eagerness to embrace and to be embraced. Exactly like the Father who runs to embrace his prodigal son.

And God doesn't need us because of anything in particular about us or because we can solve God's problems. You only have to say that out loud to see how ridiculous it is. He isn't eager for our company because we impress him, or because we are successful or clever. That would mean that God would be more interested in those people who had made a good job of their lives, than in the rest of us- which is precisely the opposite of what the Gospels seem to tell us.

He doesn't need us for anything except to exercise that love within himself which is his eternal life. He cannot bear to be separated from what he has created and in the child Jesus he goes eagerly in search of us "...he meets us in his Son and brings us home".

Most of us here today will know there is immense joy in caring for a baby or a child. It is a joy which simply cannot be put into words. You will also know such a love is accompanied by deep anxiety.

In the icon which I have been describing- and you will find it in hundreds of Orthodox churches around the world- Mary, the mother of Jesus has the most somber, almost tragic expression on her face. She is on the one hand pointing us towards the extraordinary love that God in Jesus Christ has for us, and for all his creation. But she is also burdened by this love. To be loved intensely can be bewildering and frightening.

To be loved so unconditionally by God can be completely overwhelming. It is no wonder that the Gospels tell us that the disciples of Jesus were often "afraid" in his presence. The terrible weight of God's love came into the world in Jesus.

Mary carrying the baby in her womb was the first to experience that. I would say that anyone who has begun to feel what the love of God is -with its obligations as well as its joys- can understand that feeling of Mary's of being afraid. Any believer who begins to sense what the love of God does to a life -how it goes deep into all the dark places to destroy them- will know that discipleship is sometimes a terrifying thing as well as an inspiring one.

From the moment of the Annunciation to the breathing out of his Spirit on the Cross, the presence of Jesus Christ as "God with us" is both a gift beyond words and a struggle beyond thinking.

That love came down at Christmas is absolutely and completely true- as warm, reassuring, shameless and energetic as a baby's love for his or her mother. But God with us will turn everything upside down too; his presence will confront our weak, conditional love, and half-hearted commitment and conventional justice.

God with us will oblige us to acknowledge and to see that he is unutterably, intimately close to those who we hate, as well as to those we love; those who we feel threatened by as well as to ourselves.

A God who is with us presents us with as many problems as a God who is distant from us- probably more. This is the wonder and the mystery and the challenge of an adult Christmas.

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