

Stop waiting, start living!

Galatians 4: 4-7 and Luke 2: 15-21

When my grandson, Ollie, slept through the night for the first time last week it was the best Christmas present my daughter could hope for. He is 18 months old and the sleepless nights have been exhausting for my daughter. By the time he is 18 years old the most exhausting challenge for her will be trying to wake him up by mid-day! We're now waiting for Ollie to put sentences together and articulate what he means in words rather than pointing, pulling and pushing in a baby language which is frustrating for everyone. We know what he wants, but it takes us longer to work out what he means! I reckon Jesus must feel like a baby as it takes us a long time to work out what he means when he tries to tell us what he wants. I can't wait for Jesus to grow up so we can have a conversation with him and better understand what our Father expects of us.

A 10-year-old was looking at a Nativity display in a centre when her grandmother said: "Isn't it beautiful. Look at all the animals with Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus."

"Yes, grandma," replied the little girl. "It's nice, but isn't baby Jesus ever going to grow up? He's the same size as he was last year and the year before!"

We've celebrated the birth of Jesus, but he wasn't born to remain a baby. It is probably fair to say, though, that most people are still waiting for him to grow up and become the child the angels talk about: "A Saviour has been born; he is Christ the Lord!" The Shepherds don't remain in their fields watching their flocks while the great choir of angels sing, but they get up and go to find the new born King. They received a message from God so they didn't wait until it was too late, but agreed they should go to Bethlehem to see what had happened. They didn't report to the Church Elders and enter into an intellectual discussion or theological debate about what the Lord had told them and then consider the practical difficulties before raising funds to cover their costs. They didn't wait until it was too late, but quickly went and found the child in the manger. Like the shepherds we have a story to tell which can amaze everyone who hears it. Finding a baby isn't what amazes people, but that God spoke and told them where to find him and who he was is what amazed them more.

Every baby is special; parents dream of what they will become as they grow up and mothers, like Mary, treasure in their heart what people say about their children. Families often reflect on the early years of a child and treasure the memories, but others forget until they are old enough to remind us of who they were born to be.

Jesus says that "whoever does God's will is his brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3: 35) and I love the image of being a person who can give birth to Christ and then help him grow in strength and wisdom to become the person he was born to be. We're not meant to be waiting for Jesus to come, but helping him grow from a baby to someone who can change the world. *Who would think that what was needed to transform and save the earth might not be a plan or army, proud in purpose, proved in earth? Who would think, despite derision, that a child should lead the way?*

It is time we stopped waiting for Jesus to grow-up and started living as if he was born through us to be a light for the world, to be the Word in human flesh, or a voice recognised and understood by brothers and sisters who do the will of our one God. It is what we sing to happen in the carol, *O little town of Bethlehem: O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today.* Don't wait until it's too late, but start living as Christ today!

We've been to our Bethlehem year after year, some of us for many years, and seen the child lying in the manger. We've then told everyone the story as we have understood it, but has that been because we heard God telling us where to find Jesus or because we have a tradition of a stable and a cradle with a baby visited by shepherds and wise men from the East? Is it possible we just like the story we've been told so don't listen for a new song from the angels telling us to look somewhere else today? We visited a stable, found a baby in the cradle and lit a special candle on Christmas Day and we might be glorifying and praising God for all the things we have seen and heard, which were just as we expected, but now we are waiting until the child has grown up and can tell us what is needed. If we're going to wait another 30 years for the baby to grow up I think it will be too late for most of us!

The candles have been blown out for the last time until the start of next Advent and baby Jesus will be packed away until next year when he will reappear looking no different and with the same story being told. We will light candles again to remind us of what we have forgotten and we will travel to the door of the stable and find the baby in a cradle — then leave him behind in the place where he is born. In all good faith we will sing glory and praise to God through the year, but will still be waiting for the baby to grow up and be revealed as our Saviour, Christ the Lord. We will leave him as we found him until he's grown up enough to impress us with a message of great authority inspired by the Spirit that delivers good news to the poor, freedom for the prisoners, sight for the blind and healing for the oppressed. (Luke 4: 18-19)

We are still waiting for him to arrive with that good news, freedom and healing all wrapped up as a special gift which we can open and rejoice in. We are still waiting for the baby to grow up, but when we come back next year we will celebrate once again as we remember the baby in a cradle, in a stable and light a candle as a sign of welcome to the Saviour of the world.

The shepherds don't hesitate when the Lord speaks to them through a great choir of heavenly angels, but hurry off to find what they have been told about. It was what they heard from the Lord that encouraged them to find the baby, but we don't hurry off to do anything without permission from Elders and Church meeting who will ask about health and safety and child care policies first. Many of us have a great faith but have lost trust in the voice of God speaking through angels and strangers and only believe what we read. This though is the beginning of an unfolding story, of a child growing to reveal the Word in human flesh and shine a light so that people need never walk in darkness again. We know more of the story than the shepherds did so God speaks to us in different ways today so we can go and find new life being born in humanity.

This isn't about tradition or religion, but is how God develops a relationship with humanity by inviting us to take the child from the stable with us into the world where he can grow in strength and wisdom through us. The stable today isn't a place of poverty where a child is born, but is people in poverty through whom God is revealing new life. Jesus is to be found in the hungry and thirsty; the homeless stranger; the naked, the sick and the lonely and what we give can help him grow. (Matthew 25: 31-46)

As shepherds we can feel our first responsibility is to our flock so don't step out of our comfort zone when we hear the Lord telling us to go and do something which can breathe new life into the world. The mission of the Church is usually one of going to tell the story of Jesus Christ and everything he has commanded us to do, but if we do everything he has commanded us to do we will find him in unexpected places from where we can offer him a new home in our hearts so he can grow to become who God wants him to be.

We aren't told how many shepherds hurried off to Bethlehem or whether there were others who thought it was nonsense, but the angels are still singing, God is still speaking and I don't want to wait until it's too late to find the new life which will save the world. Jesus wasn't born to remain a baby but for people to share the responsibility to help him grow up so if you find him, don't leave him behind for another year. Take him from the cradle, close the door of the stable and be the flame for the candle that can't be put out! If Christmas isn't the same next year it could be because you have taken him from the stable and encouraged the baby through your love to walk and talk and sleep through the night. Stop waiting for the baby to grow up, but start living as children of God!

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