

Christmas 2008
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I was struck by a Christmas sermon (by Martin Smith) I read a few weeks ago which speaks of a statue in which the Christ child stands on Mary's lap with arms outstretched. Mary looks at him, and he looks out to the world open, as if to embrace the onlookers, as if ready to jump into our arms, or as if to prefigure his nailing to the cross.

This is a striking image for me, not at all the cosy mother and child wrapped up in each other, the child swaddled, bound; the mother protective, loving, eyes only for him.

This is another image which includes so much more. This vulnerable infant is wide open to the influences of the world, for better and for worse, exposed, yet inviting our embrace, our care, our love and our heart, our pain, our violence.

Yet somehow his posture is disarming. How can I hurt one so open? How can I wound him? This child with so much potential, but I do.

Christmas is such a paradoxical time of cotton wool, and presents; Santa who judges, and gives conditionally: family tensions and generosity juxtaposed with this Christ figure – the human one, the divine enfleshed, whose birth only matters because of his life and death. Marks gospel skips over his birth and growing up and launches immediately into his baptism and public ministry.

John begins poetically, a mimic of Genesis 'In the beginning was the Word... and the word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth.' Of the four Gospels, only Luke and Matthew offer extravagant beginning to Jesus life –

Matthew making the links with the Hebrew Scriptures, with dreams and genealogies.

Luke is full of Angels, and shepherds and wise ones from the east – no room at the inn – all the trappings we hear every year in church.

Though my secular neighbour has no such thing, her living room is filled with Santa's, tinsel and presents, not a Christ child in sight! Different festival perhaps? Though gift is central to Christmas – God's gift.

I love babies and become so excited when a birth is immanent. To me, each birth is special. I want to be there as close to the centre as I can and sometimes there are complications. A baby comes too early and needs special care – but most babies are pretty resilient.

I love holding tiny babies and just looking. It was a precious moment to hold baby Lucy in the special care nursery the day after she was born, only a month ago and to

pray and offer thanksgiving with her beautiful parents Rhys and Anna, through tears of joy.

Each child is special.

The Christmas child – of an ordinary couple sleeps, and wakes crying to be fed. I look on at a distance, thinking of his future and the difference he makes in my life. I didn't see him grow up. I imagine he was inquisitive, intelligent, into everything, and always asking questions! I only caught a glimpse. I know him more as an adult, though he died young.

He inspires me

encourages me

challenges me

loves me,

and I am changed through knowing him – this Christ child –

Jesus of Nazareth

I have a sense of him here still. This image encapsulates Christmas for me – the child in Mary's arms, held but not contained; the man in Mary's arms open, inviting the whole world, God's gift to us.

I cannot grasp him. I cannot hold him. I cannot contain him, but he knows my name. I can only open myself to match his stance, to experience his response.

Try it. [Open arms wide]

For me, it feels vulnerable, exposed, but somehow free, open, carrying nothing, hiding nothing, very real.

I like it! I think I'll try it – this openness – this Christmas – and see what happens...

I thought I saw Jesus yesterday – he was out there in the community barefoot. Totally at home, totally himself, having a picnic with some other homeless people in the park near Lake Ginninderra. He was laughing. His gaze caught between the antics of some young boys and the sight of a young teenage mother with her child.

An old woman sat beside him on the bench, feeding the birds, wizened body relaxed in his company. He began to tell the story of his life – a rare moment. He didn't often talk about himself – more often his 'heavenly father' or 'dad' as he called God. This homey scene imprints itself on my mind, and I recall it is Christmas, and I hear the song '*drop all your masks, take freedoms clothing.*

Where the Spirit is there' – freedom

Where the spirit is there is life.

Wounds will be healed, eyes will be opened, imaging God, reflecting Jesus '... It's Christmas.

This child, man, God of love is here. Knowing all my humanness.
For me the hope is in this incarnation – God with us, in the mess of human
relationship open, encouraging and leading me on...
Here is the gift.
Christ with open arms invites us to receive his love, the gentle press to the heart of a
child held with tenderness.