

I have an early memory of a primary school nativity play. The cast were all children much older than me, probably in their final year at the school. The pretty girl who played Mary was the star of the show. Baby Jesus, of course, was played by a doll. The play finished with the whole cast gathered round Mary and the manger singing the sentimental children's 'Rocking Carol,' after which the audience of children, parents and teachers applauded with gusto. But when the cast departed from the stage, this 5-year-old was sad and almost in tears. I was upset because they had left the baby Jesus in the manger all alone.

I think I would have reflected on it quite differently today. I would have thought, how appropriate, Jesus remains with us, to live and grow in our hearts! The cast in the play could represent so much of the world that gathers around the baby, sentimentally to coo and sing carols, then leaves him there in his manger forgotten for the rest of the year. They have never let Jesus grow up. He has not been able to find a place to mature in their hearts and lives, so they have never come to know him, and to know what he is about, what he means for them and for the world.

If Jesus means anything at all to us, we can only love the baby, the child, because of our love for the man he grew up to be and love the example of life that he has set for us. In fact, we can only celebrate the birth and infancy of Jesus because of the life, death, and resurrection of the man that he became. Christmas invites us to make the journey of growth, the adventure, with him. In a daily online meditation this week, the American Franciscan, Fr Richard Rohr writes, 'We do the gospel no favour when we make Jesus, the Eternal Christ, into a perpetual baby, who asks little or no adult response from us. One even wonders what kind of mind would want to keep Jesus a baby. Maybe only one that is content with "baby Christianity."'

He goes on to say, 'God, it seems, wants mature religion and a thoughtful, free response from us. God loves us in partnership, with mutual give and take, and *we eventually become images of the God that we love.*'

In today's Gospel there is a very important, very revealing sentence: 'Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart.' To reflect, to ponder, to wonder, and also, like Mary, sometimes to be puzzled and to doubt, is all part of the process of growing in faith and love. Truly to ponder the Christmas event must surely lead us, if we are serious about it, to reflect and wonder what it was all for and where was it going to lead, for the child Jesus, for his parents, and consequently for us too.

In our second reading today, Paul urges us to let the word of Christ in all its richness to find a home within us. The word 'find' indicates that a diligent search is involved and necessary, in order that the word, the teaching, the life of Christ has been truly received and implanted in our hearts. Those who leave Jesus in his manger as a baby are not searching, not wishing to make a mature response to what his birth, his coming into the world, means and can do for them.

God's grace and love are never dependent on any performance or achievement by us. Only that we be faithful, open, available, pondering the mystery of God's presence, love and call in our hearts, and by simply realizing the union with God that we have right here, right now, accepting that God is intimately with us and not somewhere else, although of course, God is also *everywhere* else. The central Christmas message is that God is here, and God is for us. Through the birth of Jesus, God moved in with us in human form, to help us overcome the illusion that there was ever any separation between God and the world, between God and us.

Following the life of Jesus on earth, we were not left alone. God in Christ came to stay with us, to live in us through the Holy Spirit that had been present in the earthly life of Jesus himself. Accepting this truth in our hearts enables us to engage in grown-up Christianity. But it is more than just acceptance or belief, it is a call to participate, to understand that we too are created, incarnated, in the image of God. You could say that such awareness and participation is already to live in heaven. It is certainly to work with God to enable heaven to be a growing reality for the earth.

So as another year dawns may we all treasure and ponder the good news of Christmas in our hearts. May the Holy Spirit that has been given to us enable us more and more to become images of the God who loves us and who has shown that love supremely by coming to us as one of us. In small but significant ways may we work diligently with the Christ who is always with us to change the world so that it comes to live in the loving ways of its divine Creator.