

MARY'S RISK, GODS RISK, AND OURS

I was enjoying our Service of 9 Lessons and Carols last week when I was hit, as I often am when singing hymns, by a single line in a carol. It was from 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.**'

That's what its all about, isn't it, this great razzmatazz of Christmas all around us? For the believer its about Christ being born in us afresh, Christ coming *to life* in us, Christ coming to *live* in us. Be born *in us* today.

But first he had to be born in Mary. And what incredible courage that young girl had. She would have been no more than 13, probably, the age by which girls were betrothed in that culture. We would have said she should've been discovering how to be herself, emerging from childhood, not how to be a wife and mother.

But one day she was stopped in her young tracks and asked to bear a child, a special child. She was even told what his name should be.

I love the true story of a school nativity play in Chester when the first scene had gone fine – Mary was told by an angel that she'd be having a baby. Scene 2 – enter Mary and Joseph, chatting. Mary says, 'I met this fairy in the garden. He says I'm going to have a baby.' Joseph says, 'That's great. What are you going to call it?' Then Mary goes blank; she's obviously thinking hard. At last she gets it. 'Colin' she says confidently. Exit Mary, stage right, followed by a puzzled Joseph muttering 'Colin Christ?'

No, Mary knew his name had to be Jesus. And although she was being told she was to have this child, that information still came to her as a kind of invitation, a request. To which, bless her, she said yes. An open-ended, generous, trusting 'yes'. She'd take that risk.

And my question is: when we're invited again this Christmas to let Christ be born in us, are we up for a similar 'yes', a similar risk?

But let's backtrack a bit and do some risk assessment here.

What about the risk that God takes in the birth of Jesus. At Bethlehem God comes and hands himself over to us. Here, he says, take this little life, the best I can be. Let him grow, let him teach you, love you, heal you. Let him tell you about the Kingdom and show you how to live there, now. And please love him too.

How crazy a risk was that! 'The Lord has bared his holy arm' said Isaiah, but what we see instead is the vulnerable little arm of a baby, handed over to the keeping of a 13 year old mother and a father more used to nails and planks of wood than nappy rash and projectile vomiting.

A story from the 2WW brings the risk home. A woman's husband was in a Japanese POW camp and she used to go to the barbed wire surrounding the exercise yard trying in vain to catch a glimpse of him, because she was going to have his baby. When the baby arrived she reasoned to herself that one of the soldiers might have pity on her because the Japanese were well known for their love of children. So she wrapped the baby in a shawl and took him to the barbed wire and asked the Japanese guard if he would take the baby and show it to her husband, who still didn't know he had a child. She handed the baby through the wire.

It was an act of pure trust. The baby might be killed or never seen again. But the soldier smiled and took the child to the huts where her husband would be. Then he brought the child back, safe and sound. What a risk!

God handed *his* child through the wire and we killed him. But that's for later.

For now, we can see how great a risk it was for God to entrust his son to us. His Word, who was so small he couldn't even say a word, was given to us, to our company, to the vulnerability of human life.

(And his life was truly vulnerable, I believe. A friend of mine once asked a bishop 'Could God have let Jesus be run over by a camel?' Discuss.)

So God took a huge risk in the incarnation. So did young Mary. She knew she was being asked to take on a huge responsibility. She didn't know where it would lead. When she kissed her baby, did she know she was kissing the face of God? But she still said yes.

God's risk, Mary's risk. What about ours?

The risk for us is that of asking and meaning what the carol said – 'enter in, be born in us today.' Live your life in us, let us be your hands and feet in the world, doing your actions of love and mercy, fulfilling your desire that all people should live in peace, a peace guaranteed by justice. Be born in us so that our innermost being is transformed, and we become the kind of person we always wanted to be, but never quite managed.

'Be born in us today'. Its not an easy concept to describe. But just occasionally in life I feel I get it right (not often, as Wendy will tell you) but I find I'm living in tune with the divine melody and I'm carried along by the joy of it. I'm aligned with the purposes of God, with the grain of the universe.

That's when we've turned away from the false self, the ego-driven, self-interested self that pulls everything into our own agenda, our own desires – and we turn instead to the true self, the larger self, the self that God has always seen in us, the self that gives its life away for others.

And here's the thing. *That true self is always there within us, deep down, flowing through our lives. Its God's life in us.* In a sense, you see, he has already been born in us today, but

we keep him tucked up in a manger in the basement, making occasional visits to see if he's alright, but not wanting him to grow up and take over the whole house.

But at Christmas God is saying again, why not say yes, let me be born in you, trust me with the keys to your house. And let the deep flow of my life in you release your life, your true self, the free, generous, loving, forgiving self that longs to fly. Why not say yes? It won't sort out the chaos of Brexit, but it will sort out the desires of our heart, and make us more integrated and authentic in how we think and act personally, socially and politically.

How is it done, this saying 'yes'? I'm not quite sure. But Jesus said: Whoever wants to hold on to their life (their ego-driven false self) will lose it, but whoever surrenders their life to God will find it (their true self, the flow of God that's already within them).

So here's the contrast. On the one hand there's Christmas as seen by the Sunday Times Style magazine one year recently. The headline said 'Hooray for this time of year with its hedonism, its abandon and its indulgence.' The following article showed how that could be done, how the ego-driven false self could indulge itself at Christmas.

On the other hand there's Christmas as seen from the cave at Bethlehem where, as the poet said, the manger was so low that shepherds, poorest and simplest of earthly folk, could yet kneel beside it and look level-eyed into the face of God.

Yes, there are risks in letting God loose in our lives, in giving him the keys. But they're nothing compared with the risk that God took, in handing over his son, and that Mary took in saying yes. Shall we take our risk too?

Yes, Lord, 'enter in, be born in us today.'