

Breaking and birthing

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Saturday 24 December 2022

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Christmas Eve: A

Contemporary Reading: “Before Jesus’ by Alla Renee Bozarth; Luke 2: 1-7

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Courage - Compassion – Joy: these are the names of the queer angels we have above us this evening. Courage – Compassion – Joy: gifts of grace which our church community, with others, seeks to share at World Pride here in Sydney next year, and at all times.

For Courage – Compassion – Joy: which of these, I wonder, do each of us need at this time, for ourselves, or for others? May these gifts truly enrich us, for they take us to the heart of our celebrations this evening: the very presence of God in humanity, in human birthing. As such, they are pointers to the deepest reality of our lives. As we see the angels above us, see and share light among us, and, above all, see and share bread and wine – the symbols of divine humanity in us – so may we know God’s extraordinary Love, within and beyond us.

For the various elements of our Christmas celebration proclaim that, as above, so below and all around, between, and in all possible dimensions, the God of Love is born among us. Tonight, in the great Christian narrative, is the hinge of history, the heart of meaning, and the hallowing of human being. Let me briefly touch on three elements. For the Christian Christmas is a truly extra-ordinary happening, and a profound embodying, which is also ‘not quite nice’...

Let’s begin with ‘not quite nice’. When I was growing up, I remember a little village Church of England congregation which really didn’t like communion (the Eucharist, Mass, call our central Christian symbolic meal what you will). *‘It’s just not nice’*, they would say, even at Christmas and Easter, *‘all that eating bodies and drinking blood’*.

Of course, they were not alone in Christian history in saying that. One of the charges against early Christians was that they were understood to be cannibals. More than that however, deep Christian Faith has never been quite nice for cultured refinement. All that stuff about bodies and blood keep surfacing – blood and body stuff which we simply cannot get away from, as much as some have tried to over-spiritualise them.

That is part of what Alla Renee Bozarth was saying in her poem *‘Before Jesus’*¹ in our first reading tonight. We cannot escape bodily, material, reality at Christmas: for material, bodily, human, reality is at the very heart of Christmas. And material, bodily, human, reality, is often simply ‘not quite nice’. Indeed, because of this, Incarnation, at the heart of Christian Faith, is also ‘not quite nice’. Rather, God becoming fully human, material, flesh, has been, is, and always will be, quite shocking, and a stumbling-block to many of us. Yet that is how salvation happens, how Light shines.

'Not quite nice': if we don't face up to that aspect of Christmas we have really lost the plot! Sadly, so much of Christianity has been domesticated, where it has not been made ethereal. In her poem Alla Renee Bozarth restores the bodiliness, and the blood of Christmas, in the midst of the sheer material struggles for existence of a woman and her family, in the face of poverty and oppression which are still so very real, and - truly - much more than 'not quite nice' for so many in our world today.

Vitally, Alla Renee Bozarth particularly highlights that the extraordinary wonder of Christmas comes from out of a woman's body and blood. For, in our celebration of Christmas, we are marking the subversion of patterns of life and faith which have devalued the bodies and blood of so many, not least women, and particularly women in marginalised contexts.

Today, the bodies of women, and other-gendered people, continue to be abused, exploited, degraded, and their blood poured out in fruitless pain. In contrast, Alla Renee Bozarth's poem points us to how the Christian Christmas narrative turns this on its head. 'Before Jesus' there is Mary. Before Jesus breaks open bread for new life, Mary's body is broken open for God's own life. Before Jesus sheds their blood, Mary has to shed her own.

Birthing, the poet reminds us, is not only 'not quite nice'. It is breaking, wrenching, and it is risky, messy, and bloody. Indeed, Alla Renee Bozarth speaks from her own bodily experience in this. For in the first minute of her birth, she suffered a cerebral haemorrhage, immediately following her Caesarean birth. She developed lifelong fibromyalgia with multiple complications. It left its most visible mark in her drooping left eyelid, increasing the asymmetry of her face.

Embodying, with all its riskiness and bloodlines, its sheer physicality, is thus at the heart of Christmas, and it is the radical embodying of God in human difference and vulnerability. For the theologian Henry Scott Holland was surely right when he said that 'the central fact of Christianity is not the Divinity of a man, but the Humanity of a God; not life out of life, so much as life out of death.' Indeed, Scott Holland also rightly said that, therefore, '*you cannot believe in the Incarnation and not be concerned about drains.*' The Christian Christmas narrative is intimately entwined with solidarity and transformation of all bodies – social, political, and even planetary, as well as individual bodies. For God is born again among us in every struggle of human beings to give birth, not least where blood is shed.

Alla Renee Bozarth's poem '*Before Jesus*' was born out of several parts of her experience, not least that of being one of the first women ordained priest in the Anglican Communion, almost fifty years ago. As such, she has embodied in her own life and being the truth that her poem proclaims: that, if we are truly to worship the God of Jesus, we must reflect how that God of Love is actually made manifest. For the bodies and blood involved at Christmas affirm that God is made human in and through all of us.

If we wanted a symbol of how this subversive Christmas truth has been betrayed we need look no further than the continued patriarchal control of Communion (the Eucharist, the Mass) in so many places. Of course, we would not want to argue the opposite: that, as Mary's body and blood gave birth to God in Jesus, only those who had physically given birth should preside at Communion – as will be the case among us tonight. We might however hear the Christmas narrative afresh to wonder in what ways God's extraordinary 'not quite nice' embodying might be seen and made real among us afresh.

Some would call Alla Renee Bozarth's drooping eyelid a deformity, coming from a 'not quite nice' birth. That is how we often approach bodies, and the angels and bearers of God. Christmas however calls us to see and share God's life quite differently.

We can call things strange, or worse, or we can see them as extra-ordinary in the fullest and deepest sense: just as Courage, Compassion, and Joy, have come among us, in extraordinary ways, from Lismore this Christmas. For the poet-priest Alla Renee Bozarth does not call her drooping eyelid a deformity, but rather '*a winking of God*'.

A winking of God – don't you like that? That, in my view, is what the Christian Christmas is at its best: God become human in an extraordinary manner; God embodying solidarity and transformative love, but with a profound lightness of being, with joy. In that manner, the event of the Incarnation is a little like Alla Renee Bozarth views her own birth event: namely a stroke of lightning to the psyche, opening us up to the depth dimension of eternity.

Therefore, as we share in the body and blood of Christ in our Communion this night, may we know the subversive truth and liberation of the Incarnation.'

And may the angels, the shepherds, Mary and Joseph, and the baby,

continue to wink at us with the eyes and love of God –

with Courage, Compassion and Joy –

this Christmas and always.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://acupofpoetry.tumblr.com/post/83063953060/before-jesus-by-alla-ren%C3%A9e-bozarth>