

**Christmas... a new creation? (John 1.1-14)**

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Genesis, chapter one, verse one: *'In the beginning...'* John, chapter one, verse one: *'In the beginning...'*

Genesis: *'In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the deep while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God spoke a word, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good.'*

John: *'In the beginning was the Word. The Word was with God, and the Word was God... All things came into being through him... What has come into being in him was life(!), and the life was the light of all people.'*

If we read the introduction to this gospel with Genesis in mind, which is surely what John intended, it's clear that he's presenting Christmas as a story of new creation. His opening sentence mirrors Genesis word for word - 'In the beginning'. And speaking of words, in both accounts the world is spoken into being. God speaks and creation is: God said, *'let there be light; and there was light'*. God said *'Let the earth bring forth'*, and it did – profligately. On and on it goes in Genesis – God calling and creation responding, emerging, flourishing. In John's version the Word speaks by becoming flesh. There are no signs, shepherds or angels in his nativity; no references to the manger or mother Mary; just this single astonishing utterance: 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. And, in this profound act of compassion and solidarity, a new era commences – a new world is born.

And, there it is, in a nutshell, Christmas as a new creation. It sounds so hopeful, so promising, so full of possibility. And yet, I confess, this Christmas more than ever before, I'm finding this difficult to reconcile with what I'm

seeing and hearing in the world. I know others are as well. I heard one woman speak of her quietly despairing heart. I received a note the other day from another, an older woman, humble and thoughtful, reflecting on the state of things: *'The world' at large – at least as refracted through the media and my news feed – becomes daily more demented and menacing,* she writes. *'I'm thinking here particularly of poisonous and corrupt politics, overt cultivation of suspicion and hatred of the Other, environmental collapse, crushing of vulnerable people such as asylum seekers and those reliant on public support. I often feel hyper-sensitive,'* she writes, *'something as banal as seeing someone carrying coffee in a throw-away cup, or a shopper putting bananas in a plastic bag brings me to the verge of tears. If I were asked at those moments what I was feeling, I'd say equal parts grief and rage.* She's struggling, and I wonder if there's fear there as well - of where it's all heading?

She's struggling and she's not alone. Even the PM acknowledged that many this year are facing Christmas with dread. A new creation?? Where? I look around and see drought ravaged land. With every breath, I inhale smoke from unprecedentedly intense and prolonged bushfires. I listen quietly, and in my imagination, hear the ghostly whispering of lost forests, animals, homes and lives. I check the weather, and read of temperature records tumbling, and no sign of rain. A new creation?? I see a world in travail – stressed, wilting, dying. And then, depressingly, I hear news of Australian delegates disrupting global climate talks in Madrid, and I feel despondent. It seems so crazy! In pursuit of short-term profit, security and pleasure, in or refusal to change unsustainable ways we are conspiring in our world's diminishment.

So, what are we to make of it, this promise of new creation? Is it just a dream, a fantasy, even an illusion ... and the tinsel, the fairy lights, our brave

‘merriness’? Is it all just whistling in the dark; a touching but ultimately futile distraction from the truth of things?

As I’ve sat with the tension of this, and gone back to John’s account, a few things have crystalized:

For one thing, difficulty was always there. Our troubles, though significant, are not novel. There was darkness back then, and John never said this new thing would replace the old, as we do when we trade-in a car. Rather, God in Jesus comes *into* the world; becomes flesh - skin and bone; works in and with what’s there. He doesn’t dispel the darkness in a single blinding flash; no, he ‘shines’ in it - into it. It’s like the Amnesty International candle; the image is of a tender flame (a tender child) so seemingly inadequate and powerless against the oppressive forces of this world. And yet, we know, the faintest flicker makes a world of difference when its dark. Think of the soothing effect of a night light on a frightened child; exposing that menacing blackness, relativizing their perspective. It makes night habitable and navigable, and rest possible. *The light shines in the darkness and darkness shall not overcome it.*

A second thing to crystalize as I’ve sat with this is the importance and power of participation. The light from one candle illuminates a room, and it spreads further as other candles are lit and taken out. In John’s narrative, Jesus didn’t come as sole operator, he came to source and enable this new creation, to offer himself as gift to be received and shared. Not all were willing or ready for this. ‘*He came to what was his own*’, John writes (11) ‘*and his own people did not receive him*’. But some were. And, to all who *did* receive him, who opened a space – held out a wick – ‘*he gave power to become children of God*’ (12) – those with a stake in this renewal, participants in its growth and flourishing.

Which brings me to one other observation about this story, and that's that it's about a *beginning*. In the beginning, John says, it's an introduction, not a conclusion. The Word became flesh and lived among us; Jesus is born into the world, AND ... the story is still unfolding. For Jesus' own disciples, there were moments when the situation seemed too threatening to continue, the promise too fragile to rely on, when they were sorely tempted to give up. But in the end, as Peter recognized: 'to whom else shall we go', for you have the words, you are the Word of life.

That first Christmas marked a beginning, and *this* Christmas we're invited to choose whether we dare keep faith with its unfolding. We do live in difficult times, there is darkness, and dread. **And** there are everywhere also signs of love at work – people caring for the vulnerable, communities coming together to support one another, fire fighters risking their lives to save homes and habitat, people seeking to tell the truth and live its consequences. The question for us concerns the part we might play in this unfolding story. Are we willing to open ourselves to the light, to receive the love that transforms even death; to take heart and refuse the temptation to despair? Will we become those who illumine rather than darken life; those whose presence brings hope and healing rather than hurt and distrust?

Christmas, the promise of new creation, doesn't replace the world we live in, or remove our responsibility for engaging the crises of our time. It does mean that God is with us, that we may receive him participate, and be sustained in fulfilling the world's life. And the story of that unfolding we can continue writing, 365 days of the year.

*'Christmas sets the centre at the edge'*, Malcolm Guite writes (in a Christmastide sonnet). *'And from this day our world is realigned;*

*A tiny seed unfolding in the womb*

*Becomes the source from which we all unfold  
And flower into being. We are healed,  
The end begins, the tomb becomes a womb,  
For now in him all things are realigned.'*

#### References

Guite, M (2012) *Sounding the Seasons: Seventy Sonnets for the Christian Year*, Canterbury Press, Norwich.