

Second Week of Advent

Once I was walking in the Australian bush in bright moonlight. As we crossed a stream, stepping carefully from one stone to another, I looked down and saw a tiny strange being looking up at me quizzically from the water. I was shocked but not frightened and stepped back to see it again. But it had gone and I realised (a bit sadly) that it was a trick of the light and my imagination.

The gods left humanity a long time ago. They were banished by science and faded away as we better understood our own unconscious. We can do better at this point of our evolution than trying to recover the old gods. Their disappearance perhaps left the world a duller place. But the new dispensation, the new covenant whose birth we are preparing to celebrate, expels the fears attached to the old order. It is a more free world, a grownup relationship with the divine. Here we learn to wait in joyful hope even in the absence, even in the void. We wait with an imagination empty of images, sensing the real presence that will manifest in everything, everywhere, always.

Humanity is permanently pregnant with this presence. An ordinary human pregnancy teaches the expectant parents that waiting does not equate to delay or postponement. It is preparation and maturing. It is true patience that teaches us that only through time time is conquered. So, there is no reason for impatience while a new form of life grows in whatever kind of womb. While the mystery grows, ordinary life continues, with shopping, cooking, dealing with builders, talking with friends. But 'all the time the seed grows, how we do not know..' (Mark 4:27). Waiting in fidelity to what is growing is the present moment.

When birth happens the wonder of completion is accompanied by the anxiety of caring for what is now here to be loved but still so vulnerable and delicate. New life is resilient and yet perilously tender. So birth is the end of preparation but the beginning of an endless series of stages of growth. 'Epiktesis' (Phil 3:13) is the Greek word for pushing ever forward. That is what defines a spiritual life, that there is no final goal except the transcendence of every goal as soon as it has been achieved. It may sound tiring but it is the secret of the infinite, boundless expansion of love. It is reflected in the practice of continuously returning to the mantra.

People who first come to meditation with a short-term, goal-oriented mind often speak of it as a 'tool'. Those for whom it has become a way of life, a way into deeper life, think of it more as an on-going relationship, a love story. The poet Rilke wrote that 'even between the closest people infinite distances exist. Aren't lovers always coming to precipices in each other?'

Life and the Advent season reassure us that the marriage of infinity and intimacy is incarnation, full embodiment.