

Godhead, I adore thee fast in hiding;
thou God in these bare shapes, poor shadows, darkling now:
See, Lord, at thy service low lies here a heart
Lost, all lost in wonder at the God thou art.

– Gerard Manley Hopkins, SJ

It is Christ among you, your hope of glory. — Col. 1:27b

Joey has developmental challenges, I teach quantum physics. But we share a passion for medieval polyphonic music. In return for the gift of a CD by one of my favorite groups, I received an exquisite thank you card bearing Joey's own art work: a flower in all the tones of Advent — blue, rose and white with a splash of triumphant green. Inside was inscribed a careful thank you and "I love the music!"

When I told Joey's mother how much I loved the painting, she replied, "And this from the child for whom they had no hope!" No hope that he might talk, let alone share his opinions of music from centuries past.

What hopes would the people staying at that inn in Bethlehem have had for the child who arrived on their doorstep? Would any of them have placed any hope in this child, born in a stable, seemingly bereft of any family other than his weary, travel worn parents? Would any passer by have imagined that this child was He of whom the psalmist proclaimed, "Our hope is in the Lord, who made heaven and earth"?

Hope is an unreasonable thing. It expects more than is possible, more than we could imagine. As St. Paul reminds the Romans, "Hope would not be hope at all if its object were seen."

I wonder if I come to Christmas these days brimming with hope, expecting more than I could imagine of this encounter with God among us, or whether it has become just part of the rhythm of my year. What do I expect from the celebration of the feast of the Nativity? Beyond a joyous liturgy or two? Beyond the relief I feel knowing that we've plumbed the depths of the winter darkness or that I've reached the midpoint of the academic year relatively unscathed?

In his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI expresses a similar worry. Have we "ceased to notice that we possess the hope that ensues from a real encounter with this God?" For my part, I know the facts of the story so well — Christ is born, preaches, suffers, dies and rises from the dead — that it's hard to keep the unexpected in mind. The Gospel is not a undemanding recounting of what has changed, but is itself a force for change here and now. A change I cannot predict, or imagine.

Nearing what would be the last Christmas of his life and awaiting trial by the Nazis, Jesuit Father Alfred Delp, reflected that a father of the Church had called Christmas “the mystery of the great howl” — an event that shook humankind to the point it could not express itself by anything other than a wail to the heavens. An event that “burned away our romantic concepts.” All we are left with is hope, all our own concerns vanish under the immensity of what is coming to pass, what we cannot yet fully see.

What then should I hope for on this Christmas? This year I seek to shake loose the bindings of the sentimental trappings that have become tangled around this feast, both the world’s and my own. To surrender my sense of surety about the scene in the stable, to take leave of the Virgin Mother and adoring shepherds, who alike have been visited by angels and thereby know at least part of the story. To hope, perhaps unreasonably, to place myself at the crib as a passerby, as yet unaware of what has happened — but still shaken at the sight.

As unreasonable as it was and is to hope: God is with us.

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