

Galatians 3.23-25; 4.4-7; John 1.1-18

“From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”

As a very rough average, a person’s brain finishes developing when we reach 25 years old. Before that time we are malleable, open to new experiences and ways of thinking. In our teens and young twenties there can be significant shifts in opinions and beliefs, and our personalities are still forming.

However, for those of us well past that milestone of 25, there is still a possibility of change. We *can* still develop ourselves. And curiously, many of us would actually like to change. We see that there are skills we could acquire, habits we could form or break, challenges to set ourselves or ways to broaden our experience.

Many, if not all, of us would love to be a bit different. I suspect this is why we make resolutions at New Year. It’s a chance to give ourselves a bit of a kick up the backside at the threshold of a new beginning, to knuckle down to making a change that we know we need, or would at least benefit from. Truthfully, I think we all like the idea of improving ourselves.

In fact, you don’t need to look very far to know that most people have a sense that they lack something, that there’s a suspicion of missing a secret ingredient to being a better person. It’s what the world of advertising is built upon. ‘Buy this car and your life will be better!’ ‘try our face cream and you’ll eliminate both wrinkles and anxiety!’ ‘this candle will purify the air of negative vibes!’...

You all know what I mean, the faintly absurd promises of a product’s ability to improve your life. But it works! And it works because it’s based on our deep sense that we need something... that a life without any pain or unpleasantness is somehow attainable, if we only do and buy and avoid the right things. The endless quest for ‘wellness’ springs from the desire for an easy breezy life shining with oils and moisturisers and effortless success.

But let me tell you a secret that you already know - it isn’t real. That perfect person with the perfect life, who owns all the right things and moves through the world with perpetual ease - it isn’t real.

Because life is multifaceted and complex, and to be human necessarily brings the experience of sorrow, loss, pain, frustration, anxiety, and stress, alongside the joy, love, fulfilment, peace, and contentment. There is

no person who only has the desirable and good, without any of those shadow partners. We all know that love and grief go hand in hand, don't we? For life is a tapestry of losses, and when we lose what we love, we experience grief. So to be someone who is aware of themselves, who lives a full and rich life, means that we will encounter the whole range and scale of emotions. This is what it is to be human.

So what does it mean for God to become human? For the Word John speaks of, the *Logos*, to be embodied in flesh? The Greek word *Logos* is usually translated as 'word', but it can also have broader meanings, including meaning 'that by which the inward thought is expressed'. In this sense, the *Logos*, Christ, is an expression of God's own being, a manifestation of God's godness. This is what then becomes human, this expression of Godself. The Word made flesh among us.

The strangeness of the incarnation is of course that Jesus was God, but was also fully human. As a person, Jesus faced a life with the full breadth of emotional experience before him. This baby born at Christmas was not going to float through life without a care in the world, but would endure the rough hardships of mortal

existence. The Word made flesh, the expression of God's inward thoughts walking among us, as one of us.

The theologian Jürgen Moltmann says of Christ, "A God who cannot suffer is poorer by far than any human being." Yet the depth of Jesus' human experience did encompass suffering, and with that suffering came a richness of grace. Jesus, the expression of God's most inward thoughts expressed as *Logos*, embodied as a person, held all the richness of human existence hand in hand with the wonder of divinity, which together brought a new possibility of hope.

Hope is what holds it all together. Hope is what keeps us seeking, keeps us coming back again and again, searching for that fulfilment, that answer to the sense of potential improvement. For a desire to develop ourselves, that urge to be or do better this year, can be a healthy thing. To desire and work for change can actually be a valuable spiritual practice. To know where we need more grace, to figure out which of the fruits of the Spirit we need more of, to be aware of where we indulge in something that is perhaps unhealthy, and to try to work on these things, this is all deep spiritual practice that forms us into more Christ-like people.

It is from the fullness of Jesus' inhabiting humanity, experiencing the good and the bad, the pain and the love, that we receive the grace upon grace of being beloved children of God. The incarnation brought us and God together in such a way that we now call God, the creator of everything, Abba, Father.

And so when we consider what it is that we might be looking for, what we think might improve ourselves or our lives, what we are seeking for fulfilment, we need look no further than the Christ child. The effortless glow of a life with no struggles may not be real, no matter what the adverts try to persuade us of, but we can find all we need in our lives as they are, with all their complicated struggles, if we look for hope in the right places.

Moltmann writes that "Whenever we base our hope on trust in the divine mystery, we feel deep down in our hearts: there is someone who is waiting for you, who is hoping for you, who believes in you."

For let me tell you a secret that you already know - it is real. The person who is perfectly known, perfectly loved, perfectly heard and understood and valued - they are real, because they are you. This is the grace

we receive, and the grace we respond to in our efforts to shape ourselves more and more into living offerings of thanksgiving.

The carol 'In the Bleak Midwinter' puts it beautifully - "what can I give him, poor as I am? What I can I give him, I give my heart". We give all that we can, which is all that we are, and in so doing we seek to honour and worship and reflect God's love. Grace upon grace, the word made flesh, among us, and through us. May this be our aspiration as we head into a new year together.

Amen.