

Christmas Day: CCSY, 2009, 8.00am
Isaiah 9:2-7; 1 John 4:7-12 4:4-7; Luke 2:8-20

Out of the mouths of babes...

US journalist Brian Doyle reflecting on memories of Christmas, recalls:

[O]nce I remember opening a present on which a very young niece had written [intending 'Merry Christmas'] MARY CHRIST BUS with all her might, with every iota of her tongue-clenched diligence, and if I was a wise man, which I am not, I would have saved that scrap of extraordinary American literature, and folded it into my battered wallet, so that I could even now . . . years later, pull it out ever so gently, and open it up with the utmost care, and see the world as it is, ancient and glorious and fragile and timeless, and written endlessly by the young.¹

'Mary Christ Bus' . . . Out of the mouths of babes! It reminds me of a child in the Parish where I served as a curate who wanted to know why God was called 'Peter'? What makes you think God's name is Peter, I asked. Because, came the reply, at the end of every Bible reading we say 'Thanks Peter God'!

Our Bible readings this happy – if early – Christmas morning invite us to attend to the birth of a particular child, who was looked for by the prophet Isaiah, announced to the shepherds by an angel, and born of Mary, the 'Christ Bus'. The writer of our second lesson, who often addresses his readers as 'little children', draws us deeper into our *own* identity as children – God's children – by virtue of being caught up in the love of the One whom this child came to call 'Father'.

Back in January, I reflected with the staff of Christ Church Grammar School on what it was, beyond an alarm clock and the need to pay the bills, that had dragged them back to work for another year of teaching primary school-age children.

Australian Roman Catholic theologian, Anthony Kelly, lists several ways in which children serve as icons, through which light from beyond might shine.²

First, by their very being, children constantly reveal to us the creativity of the universe. They are a living witness, embodying the intimacy, ecstasy, and fruitfulness of our human existence.

Second, as a focus of wonder for this in-breaking of the new, and along with the gift and promise of it, children call the whole human family to new responsibility. The unique face of each newborn, irreducible in its otherness, insists that we make room for *this* other, drawing us out of ourselves. The tears of a child demand an assurance that all will be well,

¹ *Eureka Street*, www.eurekastreet.com.au/article.aspx?aeid=18241, cited 23/12/09

² See 'Spirituality and the Child', in *Spirituality in the Lives of Children and Adolescents: Some Perspectives*, edited by M de Souza and W Wing Han Lamb (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2008; *Interface* 10.2), 12-22.

shaming and provoking us to construct the conditions of peace, care, and justice that will not betray such promises.

And third, children pose to us a question: how will this unique new presence overflow into the existence of parents, family, and wider society? How will the event of each child be played out in the event of creation itself? And because the answer is not and cannot be pre-determined, children inspire in us waiting, fidelity, and hope.

I'm sure parents and grandparents here this morning could add to such a list.

With respect to the Christ child this third iconic quality – what Jesus would be and become – means that his birth carries particular significance, as our readings variously indicate. But even, or especially, as God's *Messiah*, or anointed one, this child shares in what every child teaches us, or remind us of: that we are all needy, vulnerable, dependent children of God – children of the universe, we might say, hoping that a healing, forgiving love is at its heart.

Jesus himself, the firstborn of all creation, the eternal Son of the Father, no less than any other newborn child, reminds us that because children are not yet full of themselves, they anticipate the character of the Kingdom of God. He went on to teach that anyone who does not receive this kingdom – this peaceful divine rule of justice and mercy – as a child, shall not enter it; a highly subversive message with respect to the sensibilities of his day: the suggestion that wisdom and observance of the law were not the primary means of grace, after all, but, rather, that child-like openness of heart and mind, the instinct to receive everything as gift.

As Kelly observes, the phenomenon of the child refreshes spirituality at its roots.

In a world of violent competition [he writes] and the exponential growth of problems . . . the child calls for the rebirth of wonder, trust[,] and playful contentment within the great womb of life and time . . . the inexhaustible mystery of what has been so uncannily given.³

This Christmas may our spirits be refreshed by the gift of the child: including, of course, our own and/or other people's children, but also that child-likeness to which each of us – young and old alike – is called again on this festival of nativity; called by the child who has been described as 'the eternal youth of God's [very] self, the . . . God who, eternally ancient yet eternally new, is the endless fullness of eternal life.'⁴

Like Mary, 'Christ's bus', may we be bearers, vehicles, of that Good News, that, through us, the world may know the wonder of his love.

And may we never cease to learn of the character of God's peaceable kingdom from the mouths of babes.

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³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations* VII, 121-22.