

Christmas 2009

The “Thin Place” of the Incarnation

The ancient Celts were alive to the possibility of ‘thin places’. In simple terms a ‘thin place’ is a place where it is believed and sensed that the veil that separates heaven and earth is lifted, and the other world appears to be nearer. People sense God’s presence more readily in so-called thin places.

For the ancient Israelites, mountains and high places were considered to be thin places. The Celts believed that the place itself called you, and that these places spoke of meeting, of transitions from one state to another.

Over time, in the Celtic world, “thin places” took on Christian meaning, describing the encounter of a more ancient and eternal reality within the present time in a place or moment

Those who write about thin places claim that ‘all through our lives we walk through these places and moments. Some people notice the thinness. Some do not. Thin places and thin moments can be seen as stopping places where men and women are given pause to wonder about what lies beyond the mundane rituals, the grief, trials and boredom of our day-to-day life. They probe to the core of the human heart and open the pathway that leads to satisfying the familiar hungers and yearnings common to all people on earth, the hunger to be connected, to be a part of something greater, to be loved, to find peace.’ⁱ

On a cold winter’s night, some two thousand plus years ago, in ancient Judea, heaven and earth joined. Eternity invaded time. The sacred embraced the profane. A “thin moment” and “thin place”, we could claim. Here was the holiness and completeness of God birthed as an ordinary baby boy. All the traditional signs of heaven, or the “otherness” of God, were present – angels and special stars. “The glory of the Lord shone around them”, the Scriptures say.

The celebration of Christmas has become for many people both a thin place and a thin moment. There’s something special – magical, wondrous – about this event. And as much as the retail marketplaces of the world try to take control, people are still drawn to reach out to capture the essence of the meaning of Christmas. Some would say it’s all about family, or all about giving; and with that, they’ve captured an edge of Christ’s message. For others, whether they describe themselves as religious or not, Christmas becomes that thin moment; there’s an awareness of the numinous, of God, of otherness. In this thin moment, across the world as we are drawn to worship, we find a fleeting taste of spiritual hunger satisfied. And if we allow ourselves to be open to the work of God in Christmas, we find a more lasting encounter with something beyond ourselves- God's realm and the life he calls us into. There’s an extraordinary drawing power, and tremendous hope, in this event, where heaven and earth become one.

Yet the most astonishing thing about this thin moment –this most ultimate of world changing thin moments, is how very ordinary it all was. Among the everyday affairs of ordinary people, God became a person.

The Gospel writer Luke locates the birth of Jesus in the context of normal human history, in the rule of the Emperor Augustus. The story is a mass of contrasts – the King and the carpenter: the pomp and power of an Emperor whose census decree

takes Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. Then there's the contrast of the glory of heaven lighting up the sky to tell mere, lowly, even smelly shepherds the news of a saviour's birth. The omnipotent, eternal God incarnate, God in the flesh, birthed in a cattle shed; his first revelation of this to poor people on the margins of society. Not in a palace amongst nobility and political and social power. God chooses to enter the world in the most ordinary and humble of circumstances, born to ordinary folks in a very ordinary setting.

But there is something that is essentially different about Jesus' birth as a 'thin moment', even as the most special of thin moments and thin places. To relegate this birth as a moment or place, as something that we catch hold of momentarily, or in special circumstances, like in this rather wonderful service tonight/today, with all its colour and ceremony – to corral Jesus' birth into a "thin moment", is to somehow diminish it, and serves to keep this birth, this incarnation at a distance. Perhaps even at a safe distance and locked in time – we can tell ourselves it's a lovely story of long ago, that somehow touches us today; and many preserve its meaning and remembrance just as a Christmas season ritual. After all, it is much safer, much less potentially disturbing for our lives if we keep a veil or distance between earth and heaven, between our lives and God. How disruptive it could be – and is - to have God break into our lives and to be aware of him as a constant, sometimes confronting, presence – our fiercely won control of our lives could be at risk! Yet, how comforting and how transformative!

Living this story out in our lives in this era is as much a story of contrasts as it was in the year Jesus was born. Yes, we can say, as we sing in our carols, that this is the most holy of nights. And we can say that it is all completely extraordinary. Yet the power of the story lies in its very ordinariness. The incarnation – the coming of God in the flesh, as Jesus – affirms that the most ordinary dimensions of life can be the place of God's extraordinary liberating and transforming activity. **Material matter, the material stuff of our everyday lives, matters to God.** So much so that he was born into the muck and mess of cow dung and dirty straw, to a young girl in circumstances that could have brought great shame upon her and her family, had not Joseph consented to marry her. That's the way heaven came to earth. That's the way God chose to break into our world and our lives. In the ordinary things of life. And this is the way that God continues to break into our lives, if we let him.

But there's a flip side here, too. This merging of God and humanity, eternity and now, also means that from that point, there is no such thing as 'ordinary' – ordinary time, ordinary place or ordinary people. As Christian writer Daniel Clendinen puts it, "If the son of God gasped his first baby breaths while screaming in a feeding trough, if census tax decrees by pagan emperors, and if ruddy shepherds working the night shift all played their role in the redemption of the cosmos [the world], then no-one and no thing is 'ordinary.'"ⁱⁱ

This, too, is a thin moment for God – his yearning to draw all people into relationship with himself, through Christ: it's his initiative to send Jesus, to merge things of God's realm with the ordinary things of his creation.

Nothing is ordinary, God is incarnate, active, involved, alive, in the stuff of our lives, opening to us the possibility of living every day, in everything, with the knowledge and a sense of God's presence. There is no "ordinary time".

In the tradition of "thin places", a veil still remains between heaven and earth, albeit "thin" and more transparent than other places or times. Christmas invites us into

God's story of him being at home with us, invites us to look beyond the veil, and experience the reality of Christ with us; the reality of a seamless merging of our earthly existence with God's eternal being. But what we're offered is something far more, far greater, and far more lasting than a thin place experience. The coming of Jesus has transformed our earthly and mortal lives. With Jesus' incarnation, and sealed by his death and resurrection and the gift of his Spirit to us, that veil which separates the holy and earthly has been forever removed.

Because God, in Christ, has got into the muck and matter of everyday life, we know things can never be the same again.

The invitation of Christmas is not a fleeting once a year grasp at the extra-ordinary, at something that stays just out of reach in our ordinary, everyday lives. It's an invitation to a lasting new life. We're invited into an everlasting, perpetual thin place; our lives joined with Christ. We're invited to say "yes" to God –to invite him to come into our lives in a new way.

For your Christmas pondering, as you enjoy the material good things of Christmas-feasting, friends, family and gift giving: how are you responding to this invitation?

I pray that you will have a happy and holy Christmas, not just a Christmas of fleeting encounter with Christ, but filled to overflowing with awareness of the presence of God with us. Amen.

ⁱ Adapted from *Walking through Thin Places*, by Mindie Burgoyne

ⁱⁱ Journey with Jesus, Christmas 2009