

Advent: Preparing to Receive the Light

Part 2 of 5

...to bear Christ into the world

Patrick Matthews

*The modern world's feverish struggle for unbridled, often unlicensed, freedom is answered by the bound, enclosed helplessness and dependence of Christ—Christ in the womb, Christ in the Host, Christ in the tomb. —Caryll Houselander **The Reed of God**, 1944*

Can you have a relationship with someone you never met? How can you know someone who died before you were even born? Caryll Houselander died in England in 1954 at age 53 (even younger than I am now.) There is a picture of her in one of her books: she is the type of person you would never look at twice, a “mousy” brunette with thick glasses, someone you would not notice in line at the bank or sitting next to you on the MAX. Perhaps most of the people she worked with didn't even know her name. Yet the angels would see this woman, who modeled her life on that of the Virgin Mary, as a radiant being whose heart is on fire with God's grace and love. To me she is a friend who I know better every time I read the words she wrote in her books *Wood of the Cradle*, *Wood of the Cross* and *The Reed of God*. She has shared the Joy of her mystical revelations with me like a friend sharing a meal, and she has deeply affected my life!

Have you ever wondered why the Church year begins in December? There is certainly no astronomical reason for it, like the beginning of a lunar cycle or the Equinox or Solstice. Several important Church Feasts might have a better claim to start a new year. Perhaps March 25, the Feast of the Annunciation, when God was conceived in Mary's womb, or Christmas Day, when Jesus was born into an ordinary life like ours. Certainly Easter Day would make a splendid New Year's Day. Christ's resurrection really changed the entire universe and opened the gates of Heaven. Or consider the Ascension, when He assumed his throne and now reigns in glory; or Pentecost, the day the Holy Spirit gave birth to the Church. But the Church in her wisdom chooses to start its New Year on a day in the final month of the pregnancy of Mary of Nazareth, a simple girl who wants to take each of us by the hand and walk again the road of sorrow and joy that was her life with her Lord and God and Creator, her son.

How does Our Lady seem to you? Can your heart and imagination project any reality, any life, into the static images of her we see so often; the loving Mother of Christmas cards, the crowned Queen of Heaven revealing her Immaculate Heart, the woman robed in the stars at Guadalupe, Mary *Theotokos*, “the God bearer?” Caryll relates at the beginning of her book *The Reed of God*, that when she was a child someone she highly respected told her to never do anything that Our Lady would not do, for if she did the angels in heaven would blush. Applying a child's wisdom to this statement, Caryll concluded that it was impossible to imagine Mary doing anything that she would do because she could not imagine our Blessed Mother doing *anything at all!*

Caryll tells us that there are two reasons why so many today find it hard to love Our Lady.

“First is that she is pure and virgin. There is nothing so little appreciated by the world today as purity, nothing so misunderstood as virginity. In many minds virginity is associated only with negative qualities, with impotence—impotence of body and mind, emotional and spiritual impotence. We no longer think of virginity as the first-fruits laid

upon the fire of sacrifice, but rather as a windfall of green apples, which are hard and sour because the sun has never penetrated them and warmed them at the core.”

Second, we find it hard to think of her as really human. We think it such a shame that “so little is recorded of her personality, so few of her words, so few deeds.” We love to marvel at the deeds and wonders and sufferings of the “great” saints, like Paul or Francis or Pope John Paul II or Blessed Mother Teresa. Indeed these people received special gifts needed to fulfill their unique vocations.

“But Our Lady had to include in her vocation, in her life’s work, the essential thing that was to be hidden in every other vocation, in every life. She is not only human; she is humanity. The one thing that she did and does is the one thing that we all have to do, namely, to bear Christ into the world.”

So what is God suggesting here? Does God seriously expect me, and you, to “bear Christ into the world?” Speaking for myself, I don’t even know where to begin with such a tall order. I am not really that smart. Also I have lots to do, I don’t have much time. I don’t have money to travel all over telling the world about Jesus. Did I mention that I am kind of not so pure...or virginal? Really, what does the Lord expect me to do about this “bearing of Christ?” God is serious about our vocation, our job, being the bearing of Christ to the world, and Mary, His mother, our Mother, is given to us as our model and guide.

I loved my grandmother, my “Nanny,” Millie Albrick so much. I was the first child of her first child, and maybe that made me special to her. I sure know she made me feel special. She never said an unkind word to me, never raised a hand to me, and this in a family that was far from ideal. Of all the love she showed me, of all the good things she showered me with, the best thing she did was to introduce me to the Blessed Virgin. Nanny encouraged me to pray to Our Lady. When I was eight she helped me set up a little shrine to Mary in my room. I had an image of our Blessed Mother, a vase for flowers, candles and some other pretty things. I would kneel and pray every day. As I got older I fell away from such practices and withdrew myself from all things Holy. Even as I grew into a skeptic and scoffer, and like the Prodigal Son, rolled around with the swine in the muck of mortal sin, I somehow knew that Mary was still there, watching over me.

There were at least three major milestones in my conversion. First was when I realized that I was miserable and needed something more to fill my life than Knowledge, Beauty and Pleasure. By God’s grace I was able to admit that I was Wrong, Wrong, and Wrong about pretty much everything in my life. I sold my possessions (well nearly everything) and struck out for a new life, somewhere, somehow. After a few months I had returned to my parent’s house and one day my mother took me with her to a conference of Charismatic Catholics. I didn’t really want to go, but she convinced me. I attended one of the small group sessions and the people there surrounded me, put their hands on me and prayed in tongues. The Holy Spirit came crashing down on me like a waterfall from Heaven. Not even an hour later during the Charismatic Mass, I received a profound healing in my body. Finally, several weeks later, I found myself in an obscure Trappist Monastery, the Abbey of Our Lady of Mepkin in rural South Carolina. I was only a guest there, but the brothers allowed me to participate fully in the monastic life. That included weekly meetings with a Spiritual Director, the beautiful Father Anthony. One day I asked him about praying the Rosary. He said that would be a good thing! So I returned to my cell, got on my knees, bowed my head and prayed a decade of the Rosary for the first time in nearly 20 years. Even though I was alone in my room, I felt uneasy starting the decade. I felt somehow embarrassed, even ashamed. Before I had finished saying those ten Hail Marys my heart changed, opened, and I felt like that eight-year-old again, kneeling and praying in my childhood room.

The great Spanish mystic, St. John of the Cross, claims that the spiritual life is not complicated, but it is difficult. He says we will always be making mistakes, always failing. But when we have failed he says that we should not give up what we were doing and try something else. Instead we should start again, and for the love of God, try to do that thing well. My friend Fr. Patrick McHugh, late pastor of Nativity Parish in Torrance, California, says the same thing even more simply and more beautifully. He would say something like this: "Here is the beginning of the spiritual life: If you find that you are a truck driver, you should try to be the best truck driver you can be." He means that we should be present where we are, to trust that God knows what he is about and has brought us "here" because "here" is where we need to be. It is in just this, during Advent, that we see the beauty, simplicity and Greatness of Mary of Nazareth.

The Almighty God sends the highest angel in Heaven to a girl and asks her if she will bear Christ to the world; not as some kind of spiritual exercise, but really and truly, giving her body to make His Body, giving her life to nurture His Life. Caryll tells us that

"She was not asked to do anything herself, but to let something be done to her. She was not asked to renounce anything, but to receive an incredible gift. She was not asked to lead a special kind of life, to retire to the temple and live as a nun, to cultivate suitable virtues or claim special privileges. She was simply to remain in the world, to go forward with her marriage to Joseph, to live the life of an artisan's wife, just what she had planned to do when she had no idea that anything out of the ordinary would ever happen to her."

Mary's way is the "small way." It can be our way too. Next week we will look at how this simple girl bore Jesus in her own body but at the same time bears the Christ to the world. Her way was to Prepare, to find the virgin emptiness, the room for Christ to grow. Her Surrender, her "Let it be done" was not just a one-time response to a specific question, but a way of life and an act of trust. Finally we will see that for her Waiting is a positive action, not merely letting time pass. Mary waited for her baby's body to grow within her own, for the child to become a man, and for the Man to bring to fruit God's plan for our salvation.

"Advent is the season of the secret, the secret of the growth of Christ, of Divine Love growing in silence. It is the season of humility, silence and growth."

I have often pondered this but have never understood
How hands that heal are stark and still, nailed to a piece of wood.
The love that makes, the love that mends, my own weak Faith could guess,
But not the love that wills to bear man's utter helplessness.
The love in the womb, the love in the Host, the love in the burial bands,
The power and the gentleness of the love nailed fast by feet and hands.

--from *In 1940*

Quotations of Caryll Houselander from the book

The Reed of God
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