

The In-spiration of the In-carnation

Christmas is the event, which amazes people from the time when God became man. It began with Mary's question "how will it happen," and continues with the asking of many of us: How can this be? The In-carnation did happen. And it happens again and again. The astonishment and amazement that accompany our human hearts, when we experience the In-carnation of God, confirm the remarkable human dignity and greatness: In our opening to the world in which we live, we develop our ability to be amazed and fascinated by everything, known and unknown, familiar and strange, disclosed and concealed. Plato in *Theaetetus* reminds us that wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins with wondering (θαυμάζειν), even though it is more in the sense of perplexity and puzzlement (*Theaetetus* 155c-d, *Meno* 84c). Aristotle insists, in his *Metaphysics*, that wondering is the beginning and principle of philosophy. We are amazed by experiencing the world in its complexity in-between singularity and plurality, similarity and difference, being static and in motion. To make the astonishment productive in our life, we need the feeling of a philosopher. The task of education is to develop and keep this feeling throughout our life in order to be able to undertake existential inquiries and face life. The nativity of God brings us into astonishment again and again, and anew. It is an opportunity for a new beginning, for engaging ourselves without hesitation to ask questions. It gives us a chance to taking a different road (ἕτερος ὁδός) and begin again from a new starting-point. The Incarnation (Jn 1:14, ὁ Λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο, *Verbum caro factum est*) is such a new starting-point, which infuses in us a passion for the possible event lying beyond human impossibility.

The practical wisdom of Joseph in finding a place for the birth of Jesus confirms the importance of the presence of the Other in our life. Every human being has to face one's life in a unique and inimitable way. However, our individual response to this existential challenge is not separated from the answers given by our fellow human beings. Precisely then, when we are radically responding to what we are called to and are most unique, incomparable, and irreplaceable, we are, in fact, most similar to each other in what makes us human beings: We all are children of the same God. And we are called to recognize that He entered into the history of the world and enters into every human history ever anew: Not necessarily among the bustle of cheering crowds, but in His own way. Our existential task is to notice that He enters *now*, take it seriously, and welcome Him. This is what we need. We can be sure that everything else will be added: καὶ ταῦτα πάντα προστεθήσεται ὑμῖν. (Mt 6:33)

The experience of the nativity of God is also an experience of pain, which hurts us in different ways and to a different degree. This pain has its meaning: It leads us toward turning to God. Struggling with understanding this pain does not need to discourage us from trusting in what escapes our comprehension. It might sharpen our senses, allow for more understanding, forbearance, and gentleness, also toward ourselves.

In Charles Dickens's, *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge's metanoia reminds us that the call to conversion can come in and through the conversation. In fact, conversation is a privileged

mode of arriving at the understanding of the need for conversion. Con-versing with Jakub Marley and other spirits, Scrooge goes through the interpretive stages of his life and finds in the disclosure of his identity the courage to change his life. The Incarnation becomes the new beginning for him. It is a new beginning which has its origin in the New-Born Jesus. The moral conversion in Scrooge's life is the consequence of taking the possibility of this new beginning seriously: By turning to the New-Born, Scrooge redefines his life. In his new geography of salvation, that which was as unimportant for him as were the little towns of Galilee receives its fundamental meaning.

The call to conversion can happen in many ways, including fear of punishment and condemnation. Emmanuel, Ἐμμανουήλ, God with us who enters into human history, does not wish to scare and terrify us and impose on us any trans-formation. The power of the New-Born, as the power of love and benevolence, has the power of formation. It invites everybody to take seriously the message of trans-forming love.

Writing poetry is a participation in the opening up of the word, in allowing for new horizons of understanding. A new poem is not only the exteriorization of the inner word (*verbum interius*, *verbum cordis*), not only the expression of the poet's relationship to Poetry, but a manifestation of the human endeavor to reach the word of Being (*verbum entis*). We know that we will never be able to express everything, condense the reality that escapes us within a single formula, successfully address what needs to be taken seriously into account. This is the joy and pain of writing, a passion for the possible and the pain of the impossibility of doing justice to the reality. As *existentia hermeneutica*, an interpretive existence, we are final, historical, and lingual beings called to understanding ourselves in our being in the world. Since our perspective is a human perspective, we will never move beyond what is human. But exactly this experience of the limit and the limitedness of language, opens us up toward Transcendence. It is not a flight into the unknown, but a recognition of our human in-between situatedness. It is also not a flight into nebulous worlds, but a resolute decision *for* dwelling in openness to the Beyond. To acquire an understanding, we need to learn to look not only beyond what is close at hand but at the Beyond itself, in order to see ourselves within a larger whole and in truer in-betweenness.

Take time to read Boris Pasternak's *Star of the Nativity*.

Winter had set in.
Wind blew in from the steppe
and the child was cold in a dark den
on the slope of a hill.

He was kept warm by an ox's breath.
Other beasts also
stood in the cave.
Above the manger floated a warm haze.

After shaking bits of straw and millet
from their thick furs,

herdsmen gazed sleepily
into the midnight distance from a cliff.

Far off lay a snowfield and churchyard,
fences and headstones,
a plank in a snowdrift,
and a sky full of stars above the graves.

Nearby, unknown until that night,
more timid than a candle
in a watchman's window,
a star glimmered on the road to Bethlehem.

It flared up like a dry hayrick, apart
from God and heaven,
like an arson's gleam,
like a farm and threshing-floor in flames.

The new star hung like a blazing stack
of hay and straw
at the heart of a world
unsettled by its very presence.

The blaze glowed red above the world,
signifying something,
and three stargazers
raced toward the call of unprecedented fires.

Behind them, camels bore lavish gifts,
and donkeys in harnesses, each more stunted
than the next, trod slowly down the mountain.

And all that was yet to come rose up
in a strange vision of future times:
all the dreams and thoughts of centuries,
all worlds, all galleries and museums,
all antics of fairies, all sorcerers' spells,
all Christmas trees and childhood fancies,
all garlands and flickers of lighted candles,
all the splendor of bright-colored tinsel...
(the wind blew ever fiercer from the steppe)
...and all the apples, the shining ornaments.

Part of a pond lay hidden by alders,
but part could clearly be seen from the cliff
through rooks' high nests and crowns of trees.
The herdsmen distinctly saw how donkeys
and camels were passing along the water.

“Let's go with the others to witness this miracle,”
they said, wrapping themselves in their sheepskins.

Shuffling through snow had made them hot.
Across the meadow, like sheets of isinglass,
sets of bare tracks led behind a shack.
By blazing starlight, sheepdogs growled
at the tracks, as they would at flared-up embers.

That frosty night was like a fairy tale:
someone new would always materialize
on a windswept ridge and join their ranks.
The tired dogs, glancing around in fear,
huddled together and waited for the worst.

Along the same road, through the same place,
angels walked in the thick of the crowd.
Their unearthliness had made them invisible,
yet every step they took left a footprint.

Hordes of travelers gathered at the rock face.
Day was breaking. Cedar trunks emerged.

“And who are you?” Mary asked.

“We are the herdsmen's tribe and heaven's envoys.
We have come to exalt you with our praise.”

“You cannot all come in.
Some must wait here.”

Amid the early morning haze, gray as ash,
shepherds and camel-drivers stamped about,
those on foot cursed those on horseback,
and, at the hand-dug watering trough,
camels bellowed and donkeys kicked each other.

Day was breaking. The dawn swept the last
of the stars from the sky like cinders.
And among the innumerable crowd, only
the magi did Mary let into the cave.

He slept, radiant in his oaken manger
like a moonbeam in a tree trunk's hollow.
His sheepskin blanket had been exchanged
for donkeys' lips and oxen's nostrils.

The magi stood in the barn-like shadows,
whispering yet barely conversing in words.
Somebody reached out a hand in the dark
to move one of them to the left of the manger,
and he glanced at the door: the star, he noticed,
like one more guest, was watching the Virgin.

1947

Translated from the Russian by Jamie Olson

Taking time teaches us patience and allows for discovering always anew what is essential to our being a human being. It helps us with understanding that we are in need of formation in order to be trans-formed. This discovery happens in the horizon between phenomenological description and hermeneutic interpretation. In this in-between we realize that our existence is an interpretative existence and understanding is the way in which we actually live our lives.

We can learn goodness, humility, sympathy, and hospitality from different humanisms, spiritualities, and religions. The Incarnate God teaches us a special kind of goodness and invites us to radical hospitality. It is also a linguistic hospitality, a hospitality extended to different ways of thinking and living our lives. To understand ourselves and others, we need the sensitivity to the word in order to see the possibility residing in the word, including that of becoming flesh.

This Christmas time, some of us are waiting only for gifts. Others for the snow. Some, for internal transformation, intellectual, and spiritual development. Some are waiting for the birth of Jesus, not really knowing what this event might bring into their lives. God comes into the world for everybody to transfigure us into his very own image (*transfigurare in se*; μετασχηματίζω means to change in fashion or appearance, in Phil 3: 21 we read of the transformation of our body: “He will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself” ὃς μετασχηματίσει τὸ σῶμα τῆς ταπεινώσεως ἡμῶν σύμμορφον τῷ σώματι τῆς δόξης αὐτοῦ, κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν τοῦ δύνασθαι αὐτὸν καὶ ὑποτάξαι αὐτῷ τὰ πάντα). No one should be turned away. No blessing be denied.