

It was comforting to see a crib yesterday in the centre of the Milton Keynes shopping arcade, just in front of the funfair but dwarfed by the merry-go-round behind, and indeed, by all the razzmatazz of Christmas. No different, perhaps, than it was in Bethlehem where a baby is born in a stable, out of sight and out of mind to the majority of people there, caught up in their own need to make a living, and to live and die in an oppressive society. We are so so easily duped by current cultural norms and one might include everything in that, from politics, to economics, to religion. 'Let's get Christmas done' can so easily become our mantra; one more item on our bucket list before the next. But Christ is not one more item on anyone's list, including God's. Not an item to fix a world gone wrong, for example; not an item to verify God's existence or to justify our own; not a thing of any sort, or an 'organism', as one sociologist was keen to put it in defence of objectification. No, a child: a human being; a person whose personhood will both depend on and challenge our own. What we see in this child is the beginning of a journey into full humanity, both for him and for us; a helpless individual who is both an affirmation of, and a judgement on, our own humanity; able to bring out the best in us but also, then, to reveal the worst. Here, I think, is what I mean, in the words of the Reverend John Ames, the Protestant Pastor, in Marilynne Robinson's wonderful novel, 'Gilead'.

*They say an infant can't see when it is as young as your sister was, but she opened her eyes and she looked at me. She was such a little bit of a thing. But while I was holding her she opened her eyes. I know she didn't really study my face. Memory can make a thing seem to have been much more than it was. But I know she did look right into my eyes. That is something. And I'm glad I knew it at the time, because now in my present situation, now that I am about to leave the world, I realise there is nothing more astonishing than a human face...it has something to do with incarnation. You feel your obligation to a child when you have seen it, and held it. Any human face is a claim on you, because you can't help but understand the singularity of it, the courage and the loneliness of it. But this is truest of the face of an infant. I consider that to be one kind of vision, as mystical as any.*

In a child's face we something of our own past innocence; something of what we were always meant to be; something of God's image now restored to us in Christ. So let's stand in that grace, without shame, without fear, without distraction. Yes, it's a gaze to reveal us for who we are, but not to keep us there. It's a face that reveals our true helplessness before God and one another. All that is asked of us is a moment of attention, a moment of return. For as we gaze at the Christ-child, we find ourselves at home, at peace; no longer constrained by the culture of our time; subject now to a universal language known to all people and all times; a language of personhood – I know who you are and I trust you.

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