

'We tell ourselves stories in order to live.'

Joan Didion, an American writer, of whom I'm woefully ignorant, but who I know has just died and, whatever her intentions or religious persuasion, has left us with a quote worth pondering in the light of today's great feast, especially as she also wrote a novel entitled *Slouching towards Bethlehem*, a critique of America in decline. It could as well be a critique of the whole project of Western neo-liberalism and of the stories we tell to avoid such truths. What would she have said, or did say, regarding Luke's account of the incarnation? It's familiar to us as Christians and the familiarity may reassure us, but it shouldn't and needn't, because the incarnation itself is one of the most unsettling and counter-cultural stories humans have ever invented, or rather described: its protagonists – if I can get away with a plural here – might be better described as antagonists: here, not to confirm our various political or economic and, dare I say, religious orthodoxies or prejudices, but to overturn them. And this, not by replacing them with other soon-to be orthodoxies and prejudices but with a graced sensibility that challenges them all. This what I think I mean, quoting Martin Laird OSA:

Millicent had debilitating depression on and off for decades but one day was different. 'I was all balled up in the very large chair in my room getting ready to paint my toe-nails. I don't know if it was the centredness I felt due to the position of my body or the self-forgetfulness that happens accidentally, such as concentrating in order to apply the tip of the brush to each toenail– perhaps the combination – there suddenly opened both within and around me a quiet centre that was untouched by the noise of my inner chaos. There was a circle of sunlight around my feet. A patch of light with enough light to live in. It didn't last long but its mark is permanent.

(p.148 *An Ocean of Light*)

A patch of light with enough light to live in.

Christ then as that patch of light – a babe in a world of darkness – but it's enough.

Well, that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Br John Mayhead
Monastery of Christ Our Saviour