

“Wonder In The Ordinary”

(Luke 2.39-40)

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Introduction

The *First Sunday After Christmas* was a favourite of mine in my 40 years as parish priest. After the big event of Christmas itself, I loved this return to the quiet simplicity of a blessedly ordinary (no fuss) Sunday.

I remember the years when Christmas services were mobbed by ‘visitors’ – hundreds of them making their once-a-year pilgrimage. And the effort we would go to, making the liturgy, the music and the ‘atmosphere’ extra special. I remember my secret hope that these Christmas liturgies would be so special, that our visitors would return the next week... but they never did. (They never did!)

And in time, with God-given insight, I realised that if you want to know who we truly are, what our Church is really like, then come on the First Sunday **After** Christmas.

This is who we are – a little band of the faithful few... gathered in worship... quietly... simply.

This is who we are...

And today... this Sunday... became a favourite of mine... for the beauty and goodness of its ordinariness.

The Holy Family

Today’s Gospel draws our attention in the same direction... to our ordinary everyday life. After the ‘excitement’ of Jesus’ presentation in the temple, Luke’s narrative says...

“... they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.” (39-40)

We call these years the *Hidden Years*, for we know little to nothing of Jesus’ childhood, adolescence, and early adult life. He’s 30 years old before the Gospels speak of him again.

The *Hidden Years*...

And these are also the *ordinary* years... decades of unnoticed, unspectacular life... growing up in a small village in a back-water region of Palestine. (As Nathanael said, “*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*” John 1.46)

But these are the years in which Jesus’ faith sparks, forms, grows, and matures.

The unique and astonishing faith we witness in the public ministry of Jesus, is formed and developed in these ordinary years.

These years must have been – in a hidden way – *special* years.

“*The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.*”

Attention to Our Ordinary Lives

As it was for Jesus, so it is for us...

There *are* special events in our life of faith – conversion moments, sudden breakthroughs in insight, times of major change – **but** the main action happens in the ordinary.

Our everyday living is THE workshop of the Holy Spirit – it’s here the divine transformation is worked in us.

And so, it’s to the *wonder in the ordinary* that our attention is called...

The *wonder in the ordinary*...

Thomas Merton, the great Christian mystic of our age, wrote...

“Either you look at the universe as a very poor creation out of which no one can make anything, or you look at your own life and your own part in the universe as infinitely rich, full of inexhaustible interest, opening out into the infinite further possibilities for study and contemplation and interest and praise. Beyond all and in all is God.”

This life – (this life we live routinely, and call *ordinary*) – when we stop to consider it, reflect on it... is “*infinitely rich... full of inexhaustible interest... opening out into the infinite...*”

Why?

Because it’s the workshop of GOD.

This is where the magic happens... where the blessing blossoms and flowers... where the beauty is crafted and revealed.

This everyday life of ours is the place of the most intimate and immediate connection with the Infinite Mystery we call GOD.

Are we alive to this treasure held in the plain clay jars of our ordinary days?

(If we don't look, we don't see.)

Thomas Merton kept a 'daily' journal... that ran to seven published volumes after his too-early death at 53 – a remarkable record of the action of God in his life. There *are* (some) special events peppering the pages, but most of it is ordinary – a reflection on the night experience of patrolling the sleeping monastery as fire warden; walks in the woods beyond the enclosure; seeing strangers on the streets in Louisville and realising he loved them; struggling with the abbot over his desire for a more solitary life...

Ordinary stuff... but Merton looked carefully and deeply and saw the transforming fire of the Spirit at work within. Many thousands of seekers, (like me), read *his* journals searching for insight and inspiration.

But the challenge is this...

Can we dare to believe this pageant of wonder is unfolding in us too?

*Would we take the time to consider **this** life, as the place of divine transformation?*

Are we open and attentive to this workshop of the Holy Spirit within us.

“The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.”

New Year

In the rhythm of the Christian year, we'd prefer to linger for a while in this Christmas season – at least until the Feast of the Epiphany, (and in some traditions, longer) – but we are swept along by a restless secular culture which has already moved-on...

And so today is also another big event on the Australian calendar... New Year's Eve. Out with the old year and in with the new!

Normally I resent the intrusion of the secular, but as the calendar turns to 2024, there is a resonance in the New Year's celebrations that I find helpful.

As our faith tradition invites us to reflect on the divine activity in our ordinary human living, it is good to hear the Spirit whisper,

'And this year Grant... this emerging year that is full of possibility... what does your heart yearn for? Where will you give your energy and attention?'

That's also a good question for today...

As people of faith, it's different from making New Year resolutions – it's not a matter of setting goals, like losing weight or reading more or *whatever*.

It's not a matter of setting goals to be achieved by disciplined (heroic) effort and determined willpower.

For we know that our growing and maturing in 2024, will be the action of GOD on and in our life. It is Holy Spirit who brings about change within us.

And yet... this magic happens in mysterious collaboration with our consent... our openness and attention.

Gerald May, a perceptive writer on the spiritual journey, describes this creative tension between the Spirit's action, and our openness to receive and respond, as the flowing movement of *stretching* and *yielding*.

Stretching and yielding. (“The Awakened Heart” p.282)

As the new year calls...

We *stretch* forward in our desire to be healthy and holy – *yielding* to the flow of divine LOVE.

We *stretch* forward in our willingness to receive new life – *yielding* in acceptance and letting-be.

We *stretch* forward (in hopeful aspiration) into the challenges of the coming year – *yielding* in welcome and trusting hospitality to whatever life brings.

Stretching and yielding.

This is our Christian prayer and intention as we begin a new year.

Conclusion

It's the *First Sunday After Christmas*... there's only a small number of us gathered here... and at first glance it all looks pretty ordinary.

And it is... BUT... this is where the workshop of the Spirit is... and there is wonder hidden here.

As Dean Michael said in his excellent Christmas sermon at Midnight Mass... whilst all the special focus goes into the events of that magical Christmas night, it's not long before everyone, including the Holy Family, go back to their usual lives.

However, this 'return to the ordinary' doesn't signal the end of Christmas, but rather the beginning.

“Christmas really begins... when we allow our lives to be the story.”