

Earthing the Incarnation

Author(s): Eamonn Conway

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Earthing the Incarnation

Eamonn Conway

I still remember one Christmas Eve as a child, in my bedroom in the dark, my chin resting on the window-sill, my eyes and ears stretching out into the night transfixed by the stars, waiting for a sight or sound of Santa's sleigh, struggling to stay awake. On Christmas Morning I swore that I had heard sleigh-bells. A part of me would swear it still.

It was easy to be attentive then, to give heart and mind fully to something. It was easy to become absorbed. And to believe. There was a great sense of the wide expanse of the universe, and of my own life too. The world was an exciting place. I had not yet learned to fear or to regret.

The years are rolling by. Already there are milestones, and millstones. The milestones – not events in themselves or achievements, but moments frozen in time past like slide photographs. Recalling these, they are like candles flickering confidently in the dark, or like raging fires which warm on a cold night. I think of people and of places, words spoken or maybe a gesture or even silence, and I knew I was loved, I counted, I made a difference. (I need to remember to check this file more often and update it. Sometimes I forget.) It is these moments which confirm that sense I had as a child that the world is safe and good.

And then there are the millstones. The list is always easier to compile. Why is that? This sense of being weighed down, broken down, humiliated. The lost opportunities, the shattered dreams, the broken promises. And so I have a file of letdowns and hang-ups as long as my arm. I have been seasoned, and hardened. The child in me hasn't died, but he has been buried alive.

It's Christmas. A part of me could run away from it very easily. Take me to the sun. Smother me in food and drink. Sleep me. The very thought of having to buy presents, send cards, wish 'Happy Christmas' to people I haven't heard from since last year! The

Eamonn Conway is a priest of the archdiocese of Tuam. He lectures in Fundamental Theology at All Hallows College, Drumcondra, Dublin.

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Christmas lights are up already and already they offend; they seem gaudy and cheap. You can't obscure the hurts, the pain on the streets, as easily as that.

What I *really* need this Christmas is more than lots of food and drink and partying or even a quick fix in the sun or on a ski slope, not that any or all of these would do me any harm in themselves. But sooner or later the holiday would be over and I would have to come back to 'reality'. Is that all there is to Christmas, a chance to escape for a while, a chance to forget, to recover, to charge the batteries until the next 'break'? Again a part of me says 'yes', that's all that's to it. The magic has gone out of Christmas. It is only for the children. And that's sad but that's the way it is. And it's particularly sad if you don't have any children yourself to be with, to surprise, to 'plug in' to their wonder and excitement, to see Christmas through their eyes, and, even for a moment, to remember what it once was like, creeping down the stairs to the tree, sizing up the the parcels, ripping off the wrapping paper. But now it is we ourselves who are unwrapped and torn. And trying to have a 'surrogate' Christmas through the eyes of those for whom wonder has not yet died is only another form of escape from 'reality'.

So *can* Christmas have any meaning for an adult? Well, let's look at what I now need. I could put it like this. I desperately need a word to be spoken to me to reassure me of what I once believed as a child, that the world, my world, is a safe place, that I am loved beyond words. I have an ache for communion inside of me which no relationship however intimate seems to ease. There is an inner loneliness, an alcove in my heart that no one seems able to reach and which I only dare to peer into occasionally myself, when I am feeling particularly loved or frightened. Whatever 'successes' there are, whatever joys and moments of celebration, eventually they seem to surrender to the routine and get lost, swallowed up. I need to hear a word which speaks to the loneliness and the routine, which somehow sanctifies and blesses, which transforms, and lifts up.

These are my needs, or some of them. What now? I can gaze and gaze into the dark night of my spirit and my feelings, analyze and catalogue, measure my every heart-beat, listen to my body, make that so-called long journey from head to heart or heart to head, allow 'experts' to probe me and process me, but at some stage I have to pinch myself and wake up. It's not so much a dark night as a black hole. I am lucky if I come out of all of this knowing my own emptiness. And when the bills are paid, I still haven't changed. The dark lonely alcove in the heart still waits. The head too wants some answers because an awful lot of life just doesn't

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seem to make much sense. And so, the question is there anything at all in the wider human experience, anything at all which speaks, which casts lights, which unravels, which answers? There is a risk even in posing the question. It means acknowledging the depths of my own emptiness. It means risking hearing a 'no' answer. But I either face the emptiness or fool myself.

THE STORY OF CHRISTMAS

I withdraw now into that lonely alcove inside me, with my questions and my doubts. And in the emptiness and the stillness I take a few moments to listen to the story of Christmas. Oddly enough, it is captured for me not so much in the words of scripture, a little arid and scarce in themselves, but rather in the music of Christmas night. *Silent Night, Holy Night ... O holy night, the stars are brightly shining ... long lay the world in sin and e're a pining 'till he appeared and the soul felt its worth ...* The air is pregnant. There is promise and hope. There is something coming to fulfilment and completion. Could a Saviour really be born this night, someone who could set all things right? As a child I believed that a mother's kiss could put all things right. Now the world seems broken beyond repair. Just think of Rwanda, Northern Ireland. The quiet deep hurts all around us. The evil men and women who seem to thrive on hurt and greed. And the hurt and greed in myself. All of this makes journeying to Bethlehem difficult. Yet, according to the story, people *did* make their way there. Shepherds, used to silent nights rather than holy ones were summoned to the stable. Just as well a stable – with their work and their smell they would not have got past the door of an inn. That's Luke's story. Matthew speaks of wise men, possibly kings, led by a star to a house in Bethlehem where they find the infant king. This star-following business was probably some kind of weird pseudo-religion. Yet it still got them there. Strange this. There is a sense that for one moment all of creation comes together. Angels and shepherds and kings are united around this crib. And it is night. Darkness covers the land. There are countries and towns and streets where it is not safe to go out after dark. Darkness imprisons. The darkness in our hearts imprisons. *The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; on those who live in a land of deep shadow a light has shone* (Is 9:1).

Further into the story it really begins to dawn on people. At first in small ways. Jesus' openness and sensitivity, especially to people in pain and need; yet he needed time alone too. The way he became quite angry and passionate; fearless outbursts against the small but tough men (always men) who were intimidating and bullying ordinary people and, worse, doing this in God's name.

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Jesus had a sense of the beauty and the wonder of each day, of the blessedness and promise of everything, lilies, widows, sheep, lost coins, cripples and lepers, dusty sandals, fish, wine and bread. And he had a way of healing and uplifting people. The very weight and shame of sin seemed to vanish in his presence and all sorts, some who had not stood up straight in years, did so, after a word from him. It came out in big ways too – in the hard decisions. The choices. The priorities. The road taken. Jesus listened. And he spoke. He spoke the truth which had authority of its own. And that was the problem. We know the final chapter. The blood, sweat and tears. The sense of betrayal, abandonment. He was on his own. No magi or shepherds around now; only a few women. The cross. That hideous cry from the bowels of the earth, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me' (Mk 15:34). Then death. For us, for all. The worst happened. And yet just where most stories seem to end, this one took off. The darkest moment, the moment of deepest dejection, emptiness, absurdity, was filled with a sense of light and of glory. Its hard to find the words. Just where decay should have begun to set in, there was new life; in death, a birth. We find a group of fairly average followers transformed into a body of men and women ready to give up old ways and to live and die in memory of Jesus.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

If we desire this story to speak to us then we must re-tell it to ourselves, gently. We must bring to it our own questions and our own mysteries; escort it into the midst of our our own flesh and blood and let it mingle. When we do, we will find ourselves delighting in a love which we could never have hoped to experience and for which no self-exploration could have adequately prepared us.

God knows us better than we know ourselves. And if the Christmas story has anything at all to say, then it is saying that God also accepts us, even more than we accept ourselves. This, in fact, must be the central meaning of the Christmas story. God's Word becoming flesh means that God is accepting all flesh, loving it, even unto death, and beyond. And it is our flesh and blood as it is, here and now. God can give God's self away totally, without fear. God can love unconditionally. The message of Christmas is that God freely chooses to do so. I am not sure that most of the time we actually get this message. Much of our lives seems to be spent earning or meriting love, including that of God, winning God's favour. We really find it hard to believe in a God who loves unconditionally, and perhaps we prefer not to believe in such a God. Unconditional love is the kind of love which we cannot control. We are not in charge; we cannot turn it on or off. It humbles

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us: 'Is all our sinning our own refusal to know that we are small?' (Brendan Kennelly).

In the life of Jesus of Nazareth we learn that God's ultimate word to humanity is one of unconditional love. Today it is sometimes remarked that the Church has 'gone soft' on God, that all this talk of unconditional love undermines respect and reverence before God. In actual fact there is nothing more challenging than the experience of unconditional love. In its wake we cannot remain as we were. We find ourselves either accepting this surprising offer of acceptance, or rejecting it. We become filled either with love or with hatred. It is our life's task to find the courage to accept God's acceptance, such courage being, according to Paul Tillich, a good description of faith. St John of the Cross once taught, 'where you do not find love, put in love and you will draw out love'. This is a good description of what God does with us. Even those aspects of ourselves of which we are ashamed, which we abhor, which we hide from ourselves and from others, our catalogue of sins, what we did and what we failed to do, that part of ourselves marked 'private and personal', this is loved by God. It is redeemed by God. It is a measure of our faith in God, of our trust in God's love and God's power, the extent to which we have accepted ourselves. To accept and love our own sinful nature is not to approve of or condone it. But it is to place our whole lives in God's hands with confidence and allow God's Word to touch and to heal.

Accepting a gift is often very difficult for us. In the next few weeks we may find ourselves saying more than once, as we carefully unwrap a present we have just received, 'you shouldn't have bothered', 'you didn't have to'. Well, of course, that is the whole point of a gift. It is something 'given'. It is generally easy to give. It takes humility and courage to accept.

ENCOUNTERING THE WORD

We must first encounter the Word of God, or more accurately, become *aware* of our encounters, before we can accept it. Patrick Kavanagh's well-known poem *Advent* outlines very well one of the key obstacles to our celebration of Christmas today:

We have tested and tasted too much, lover –

Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.

Our lives are not any less wonderful or mysterious than they used to be. But we seem to have chosen to count as wonderful only the extra-ordinary, the 'highs'. To some extent this is even the case in the Church: we generally only use the term 'miracle' to describe apparent apparitions and cures. Yet ask a prisoner, and he will talk of the miracle of freedom. Speak to a dying person, and she will

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recount the miracle of life. Often our search for the extraordinary, whether in religion or other aspects of our lives can be simply an escape and a lack of faith. It may mean we don't see God's powerful and wonderful activity right under our noses. Kavanagh continues in the same poem:

O after Christmas we'll have no need to go searching
For the difference that sets an old phrase burning –
We'll hear it in the whispered argument of a churning
Or in the streets where the village boys are lurching.
And we'll hear it among decent men too
Who harrow dung in gardens under trees,
Wherever life pours ordinary plenty.

This is precisely what it means to say that 'the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'. God is here, in the bits and pieces, the messiness. If we have religious 'highs', beautiful liturgies, wonderful places of pilgrimage, they only provide valid religious experiences if they enrich where 'life pours ordinary plenty'. For it is here, in the day to day that we meet the incarnate God. I remember once seeing a health campaign slogan which said 'you are what you eat'. But we are really the people we become in and through the free choices and decisions which we make in our daily lives. This is where we stand before God. This is where we are *present* to God and *accept* God. This is where we give God glory. And this is where we experience God's peace. 'Peace on earth' is the message of Christmas. It is time we earthed our relationship with God again.

There is a message here for the institutional Church this Christmas. We are so like Kavanagh's tough men in his poem *Epic*, clinging to 'that half rood of rock, a no-man's land surrounded by our pitchfork-armed claims'. The Word which become flesh still dwells among us. It is a living Word. Do we believe in an incarnate God, a God telling us something daily in the hearts and minds of God's people? Have we the courage to listen, and to change, mind-sets as well as structures?

CELEBRATING THE WORD

All sorts of people make their way to Mass at Christmas. Paul Durcan writes in his new poem *Christmas Day*:

It is difficult not to go to Mass.
Mass is the only chance
One has to be in company
To be in society.
To emit.
I do not mean to meet
People;

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I mean simply to be
Of people other than oneself.
To be choral.
Dumb is nobody.

It's not our Church. And Christmas is an appropriate season in which to be liturgically generous and welcoming. It could be a time of conversion for everyone concerned. It is a time to be aware of the pain that may be there – family conflict, empty places around the table, new faces, no one at all. One of the great Advent texts, which provides the opening words of Handel's *Messiah*, is 'comfort my people, says your God' (Is 40:1). People are comforted even though they have sinned. And they are brought back from exile even though it was their own fault that they were exiled in the first place.

A litany of 'thank you's' cannot substitute for proclaiming the Word. The Christmas liturgy is an opportunity to stretch minds as well as warm hearts. And people have questions and doubts. A good commentary on the Infancy Narratives is useful. By treating the story in a naïvely historical manner we miss out on much of the extraordinarily rich symbolism which the authors intended us to grasp. Take, for example, Luke's use of the term 'swaddling clothes' which we find twice in the Gospel text for Midnight Mass (Lk 2:1-14). It is linking Jesus to King Solomon, his predecessor on the Davidic throne, who was also 'nursed with care in swaddling clothes' (Wis 7:4). It is also worth noting that 'mangy stinking bathless shepherds are in their ritual uncleanness an encouragement for all who lack religious status'.¹

We could also help people to understand how one tiny event, which seems so remote in history now, could be so decisive. Single events *can* change the course of our own personal history as well as the history of humanity. We live and breathe in history. So God's relationship with us must also have a history. And in this relationship there can be decisive moments, moments which radically change the relationship, moments in which everything is revealed and from which there is no turning back, for God or for us. And while it all happened a long time ago, 'he who cannot draw on three thousand years is living from hand to mouth' (J. W. Goethe). Either we are people of memory, or we are not people at all. We talk a lot of the need to be healed of memories. But we need to be humble enough to allow ourselves to be shaped and determined by memory as well. Memory gives us identity. It tells us who we are. It tells us that we are not self-made. It takes humility to listen.

1. F. W. Danker, *Jesus and the new age according to St Luke*, quoted in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 683.

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But at the end of the day ‘preachers fail by trying to talk people into belief; better they reveal the radiance of their own discovery’ (J. Campbell). The task for each of us this Christmas is to re-capture the capacity we once had as children to be fully present, attentive, enraptured. We will need this if Christmas is to happen for us; if, in the words of the Preface, we are to see in him our God made visible and so, become *caught up* in love of the God we cannot see.

Vote of thanks. Thanks to presiders and other specialized ministers serving the ministering assembly who refuse to say more than is absolutely necessary. The human ear is under almost constant assault in our culture. The fact that less is more – more penetrating, more striking, more memorable – is particularly evident in an assembly gathered for the worship of God. The kind of running commentary in which some clergy indulge (and occasionally other ministers as well) tends to numb the aural sense, weaken the impact of liturgy’s significant verbal elements, and drown the total experience of the symbolic act in its flood of trivia.

In addition, the rhythm, flow, relation of spoken or sung texts in the rite is severely damaged by the interjection of sergeant-like directives of any sort. ‘Please stand,’ when a lifting of the hands would do. ‘Please sit,’ when a lowering of the hands would do. ‘Please sing hymn number 275,’ when a hymn board or a printed program would do. ‘Please come to communion by way of the centre aisle,’ when the silent action of ushers or a printed program would do. Points of definition, like the beginning and end of a rite and its moments of transition, appropriately resist arbitrary change, as do the brief formulas which call for a response from the rest of the assembly. No ‘Good morning, sisters and brothers’ is as worshipful an orientation after the opening song of the Sunday assembly as the sign of the cross and the scriptural greeting. The former spotlights the speaker; the latter, the purpose of the gathering. And thanks to the presider who greets ‘... be with you all’ rather than ‘... be with each and every one of you,’ as if we were not already sufficiently fragmented, as if our need and hunger at this moment were not to feel and be as one. Custody of the tongue and the humility of worshippers on the part of presiders, cantors, readers and all other specialized ministers, are priceless blessings for an assembly whose culture has fed it up to its choking neck with stars.

—ROBERT HOVDA, *The Amen Corner* (ed. John F. Baldovin),
Liturgical Press, Minnesota, p. 121