
FAITH FOCUS - The Gift of Christmas: Learning How to be Gratefully Dependent

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The Letter to the Hebrews begins with the boldest and most unambiguous statement possible of what's new and different about Christmas. God has always been communicating with humanity, in any number of ways; but what we need from God is more than just information.

The climax of the story is the sending of a Son: when all has been said and done on the level of information what still needs to be made clear to us is that the point of it all is *relationship*.

God speaks at last through a Son, so that we can grasp the fact that really knowing God, really

responding to his Word of promise and life, is a matter of relationship. It's becoming God's child. And the consequence is that we ourselves learn to speak and act in such a way that others want to share that relationship.

The Son, says the writer to the Hebrews, is the heir of all creation; the Son is the life-giving principle of all reality; the Son radiates and reflects the unimaginable beauty and light of the source from which he comes.

When the Son is born among us, what happens is that this unlimited, unending torrent of light and glory, of intelligence and order and loving contemplation is poured into the container of a human mind and body.

Through what he then does in that human mind and body, the possibilities for human life are changed for ever, and we are invited into the same place in heaven that the Son occupies for ever - the place that St. John's gospel defines as "nearest to the Father's heart." And the letter-writer triumphantly claims that our human destiny is thus to be even closer to God than the angels are. Christian poets and thinkers have often imagined the angels looking at us with amazement - such very unpromising material,

such limited capacities, such a genius for self-deception and pettiness, yet promised such a future.

Relationship is the new thing at Christmas, the new possibility of being related to God as Jesus was and is. But here's the catch and the challenge. To come into this glorious future is to learn how to be *dependent* on God. And that word tends to have a chilly feel for us, especially us who are proudly independent moderns. We speak of "dependent" characters with pity and concern; we think of "dependency" on drugs and alcohol; we worry about the "dependent" mind-set that can be created by handouts to the destitute. In other words, we think of dependency as something passive and less than free.

But let's turn this round for a moment. If we think of being dependent on the air we breathe, or the food we eat, things look different. Even more if we remind ourselves that we depend on our parents for learning how to speak and act and above all how to love. There is a dependence that is about simply receiving what we need to live; there is a dependence that is about how we learn and grow. And part of our human problem is that we mix up this entirely appropriate and

life-giving dependency with the passivity that can enslave us. In trying - quite rightly - to avoid passivity we can get trapped in the fantasy that we don't need to receive and to learn.

Which is why it matters that the Letter to the Hebrews portrays the Son in the way it does - radiant, creative, overflowing with life and intelligence. The Son is all these things because he is dependent, because he receives his life from the Father. And when we finally grow up in to the fullness of his life, we shall, like him, be gladly and unashamedly dependent - open to receiving all God has to give, open to learn all he has to teach. This is a *dependency* that is utterly creative and the very opposite of passive. It is a matter of being aligned with the freest activity we can imagine - God's eternal love, flowing through us.

At some level we all recognise this, because we've all seen something like it at work in our family lives and even our closest friendships. Depending on each other, receiving and learning, are natural things, natural expressions of closeness and trust. Yet we have over the long millennia of human existence created a whole culture in which there is a basic impatience about

learning - we want to get to the point where we can say, OK that's enough, I know what I need to know - and about *receiving* - we don't want to be indebted to others, we want to stand on our own two feet.

I can hear voices from my parents' and grandparents' generation saying they don't want charity, they don't want to be beholden, they don't want handouts from the state or anywhere else. There's something brave and admirable about much of this when what it represents is a generous unwillingness to burden others. But it can also reflect a stubborn hankering after a life that is under my management and doesn't need support from outside.

One of the worst effects of this culture of impatience and pride is what it does to those who are most obviously dependent - the elderly, those with physical or psychological challenges and disabilities, and, of course, children. We send out the message that if you're not standing on your own two feet and if you need regular support, you're an anomaly. We'll look after you (with a bit of a sigh), but frankly it's not ideal.

And in the case of children, we shall do our level best to turn you into active little consumers and

performers as soon as we can. We shall test you relentlessly in schools, we shall bombard you with advertising, often highly sexualised advertising, we shall worry you about your prospects and skills from the word go; we shall do all we can to make childhood a brief and rather regrettable stage on the way to the real thing - which is *independence*, turning you into a useful cog in the social machine that won't need too much maintenance.

Can we as a society accept and even celebrate the fact that there is a place for proper and mature dependence - that human beings need to receive and learn: not so that they can get to the point where they stop receiving and learning, but so that they can acquire the habits of receiving and learning in ever-new settings? Can we help children enjoy their dependency so that they don't just leave it behind but get to manage it with freedom and imagination as they grow older?

And that involves two difficult lessons for us adults. One is simply to reconnect ourselves to our own capacity to receive and learn with joy and excitement - to become like little children, as Somebody once said. The other is to be ready to give the nurture and security that children need -

to create the safe places where they can learn, where they can make their mistakes. To do this is to show that we treasure dependency and that we shan't either exploit it or ignore it. Embracing and celebrating our own dependence gives us the vision and energy to make sure that others have the freedom to make the most of their dependence too. And this means working to give all the children of the world the security they need.

In our own society, there are problems enough - children who have never known stability in their family life, who have never known a father or who have been pushed into taking responsibility for a parent or for brothers and sisters, with a mother who is ailing, addicted or otherwise incapacitated; children with workaholic parents, materially well off but deprived of warmth and relaxation with their family; worse still, children and young people who are systematically exploited through sex trafficking, children who are trapped in gang culture.

Worldwide, all these problems and more are all too visible; perhaps one of the most appalling phenomena, still affecting hundreds of thousands of children, is the exploitation of children in

meaningless and savage civil wars - children who are abducted, brutalised, turned into killers, used as sex slaves. To hear of these experiences is almost unbearable, yet the scandal continues.

These children are created, like all of us, to become fully and consciously children of God, to enjoy that glory we reflected on a few minutes ago. Their suffering is an insult to the purpose of God, a contemptuous refusal of the gift of God on the part of those who keep them in their different kinds of slavery.

God's gift at Christmas is relationship, not just another human relationship but relation to God the Father by standing where Jesus stands, standing in the full torrent of his love and creativity, giving and receiving. To come into that place and to be rooted and grounded there means letting go of our fear of dependence and opening our hearts to be fed and enlarged and transformed. And that in turn means looking at how we handle dependence in ourselves and others, how we accept the positive dependence involved in lifelong learning and growing, and help one another deal with it positively.

So the important thing is not that everyone gets to stand on their own two feet and turns into a

reliable "independent" consumer and contributor to the GNP. What we expect from each other in a generous and grown-up society is much more to do with all of us learning how to ask from each other, how to receive from each other, how to depend on the generosity of those who love us and stand alongside us. And that again means a particular care for those who need us most, who need us to secure their place and guarantee that there is nourishment and stability for them.

As we learn how to be gratefully dependent, we learn how to attend to and respond to the dependence of others. Perhaps by God's grace we shall learn in this way how to create a society in which real dependence is celebrated and safeguarded, not regarded with embarrassment or abused by the powerful and greedy.

God has spoken through a Son. He has called us all to become children at the cradle of the Son, the Word made flesh, so that we may grow into a glory that even the angels wonder at. To all who accept him he gives power and authority to become children of God, learning and growing into endless life and joy.

Rowan Williams - Among his most recent books are [The Tragic Imagination](#) and [On Augustine](#).

