

LIGHTING THE ADVENT CANDLE



“I live my Advent in the womb of Mary.”ⁱ These haunting opening words, sketched in the poem, “Advent,” by the Wisconsin Carmelite poet Jessica Powers, were imprinted in my heart many years ago. For Jessica and for myself, this open, expectant womb of Mary is: “faith’s walled place, with hope’s expectant nativity.” In this moment, as Advent begins and I enter into this Mary womb spaciousness, within the soft darkness of my own heart-womb, I have a sense of the luminous divine foetus, eternally being born in and through me. And, as I follow the stirrings of love and enter more intensely into the beauty of this endless birthing, I wait in Mary darkness and prepare for the birthing that is to take place in this phase of my life. My yearning is to be a *Theotokos*, a Godbearer, as Beatrice Bruteau invites us to be, and consciously participate in the ongoing incarnation of the Christ, in us, through us and amongst us in the fullness of the organic creativity of our world. I desire to prepare now for a unique birthing that the divine Beloved is preparing for me.

As I reflect over the many graces of the year, I am drawn back to my time at St Mary’s Cistercian Abby in Helfta, East Germany, to Easter week, a time of joy and new life. The nuns who now live there have known so much suffering, as their beautiful Abby, (*Kloster Helfta*) - that was built in 1229 and had become a leading centre for mystical prayer and learning - had been vandalized throughout centuries of oppression. It was dissolved and left in ruins. This is not the end of the story however, as this sacred place, that holds so much love and beauty, and so much



horrific persecution and pain is being lovingly restored. It is now a womb space, a place of silence and prayer, a sacred place where new life can be found, arising from the very depths where suffering was so writhe.

These prophetic women are reclaiming and re-creating something new for this time, through creating a

profoundly unitive silence within the rhythm of the hours, a life lived simply in Presence. Easter has unfolded into Pentecost, into ordinary time, into this Advent season which again calls me to reflect and discover deeper joy and new life. Poignantly, as I light the first candle of Advent its light illumines the darkness of the year. So much political turmoil, so much unnecessary suffering for so many in our world! Our land cries out for us to listen, our most vulnerable feel abandoned by systemic indifference and yet it is here, in this moment, in the midst of all this suffering, that the Christ child is being born anew. Our challenge is to learn to see this divine presence in the dark.

I remember Gertrude of Helfta, (died 1302) her love, her wisdom, the prophetic stance of her capacity to live in the womb-space of Mary, eternally birthing the divine lover. Her *Spiritual Exercises* and her *Herald of God's Loving Kindness* are spiritual master-pieces that still have insights we desperately need today. I am drawn to her reflection on the meaning of incarnation. When engaging with her wisdom, Gertrude invites us to cultivate the senses of our heart and enter into her vivid pictures of Love's consummation within her. She draws us into her imagery and then beyond, into a unitive knowing as she encourages: "May they be led by these pictures, so to speak, that I have painted to taste within themselves the hidden manner which cannot share any trace of material imagery; she alone who eats it will still hunger for more." Gertrude suggests tasting and digesting her colourful word pictures and prays: "that we may feed on this manner to satiety throughout this journey..., until with uncovered face we reflect the glory of Love, and are transformed from brightness to brightness, by your most delightful Spirit." (*Herald*, book 2. chapter 24. Paragraph 1).

Gertrude's painted pictures of the birthing of the divine place us in this transforming brightness. She invites us to awaken the eyes of our heart-knowing, embrace the birth of the Christ child with our own heart's depths and come to appreciate the fullness of this divine presence within all creation.



In the chapter written by her own hand, in *The Herald of God's Loving Kindness*, Gertrude paints an enchanting picture for us to enter into and experience in this atmosphere of Advent's promise. At first, she lavishes us with a plethora of images of the divine that emphasise the power of the loving-kindness, the "depth of the abyss of the inscrutable wisdom" and "breadth of desirable love" of our God. Then, as she begins to explore the wisdom that flows from her encounter with Love's presence within the darkness of Christmas eve, she floods our imaginations with a whole array of metaphors, describing the torrents of the extravagant sweetness of the dew of divinity, raining down the honey of cherishing love upon the whole world. A favourite scriptural mantra arises from her heart's depths, "Anyone who clings to God becomes one spirit with God" (1 Co 6:7). Gradually, as she enters more fully into the darkness of the holy night, Gertrude sees with the eye of her heart, right in the midst of the darkness, the ray of light of the child, truly God and truly human, born from the womb of the maiden, Mary. Tenderly, and with a sense of wonder, she describes how as she cradles and takes the child within herself, she suddenly becomes the same colour as the child (See, H 2.6.2). This identity in colour, which she says cannot be compared to any visual quality, evokes oneness, not only in spirit, but in being. Notice how Gertrude chooses not to remain an observer to this Lucan scene, but cradles, enfolds, embraces the child within her whole being. In this cherishing moment, Gertrude perceives how she is a reflection of the Christ child, whom she is embracing within herself.

The scene then transposes beyond imagery as soul wisdom emerges in Gertrude's awareness. The beauty of the song of Colossians again rings in her heart: "God shall be all in all" (1Co 15:28). This is the meaning of the incarnation. God is and shall be "all in all." In this *alling*, all being is infused within the love of God. As insights continue to flow, we see how the child is now fully grown into her Spouse, with Gertrude too, invited to be fully grown in Christ. She realizes that in and through the incarnation she holds her Beloved as spouse within her heart. With her soul thirsting for more, she drinks the divinely inspired words, as her Spouse explains to her: "Just as I bear the stamp of the substance of God the Father in regard to my divine nature, so you bear the stamp of my substance in regard to my human nature, for you receive in your deified soul the outpourings of my divine nature, just as the air receives the sun's rays." (H. 2.6.2). Gertrude, the theologian comes to the fore as her Spouse explains in the language of the Credo, that we bear the stamp of the substance, the essence, the self of the Christ, not only in humanity, but in divinity. We are infused with Christic nature, like air imbibing rays of the sun. Her Beloved continues: "Penetrated to the very marrow by this unifying force, you will become fit for a more intimate union with me (H. 2.6.2)." Gertrude appreciates how she, and all humanity, are permeated to the very marrow of our being with the humanity and divinity of the Christ. We are one with Christ. Each of us is a vessel filled with the liquid of divinity and humanity in the most exquisite intimate union, as God continues incarnating and becoming "all in all" in and through our lives.

In this season of Advent, Gertrude invites us to enter into the womb of Mary, to give birth to and encradle the divine life within us, to nurture this mutual enfolding and become fully grown, ripened in the intimacy of this divine-human relationship. When we light our Advent candles as we enter into our communal heart during our CEN meditation time, we too consciously participate in God becoming "all in all." May we enter this evolutionary moment with "hope's expectant nativity" and live this "intimate union" with our Beloved. In this beautiful season, may we light the advent candles and learn to see in the dark with this soul vision. One in desire to express the divine desire, we pray with Gertrude:

*O serenest light of our soul, very brightest morning, ah, break into day
in us now and begin to shine for us so that by your light we may see
light and through you our night be turned into day... Visit us now...
that we may suddenly be transformed entirely into you.*

Spiritual Exercises, Chapter V:lines 30-35

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Gertrude's texts used: *The Herald of God's Loving-Kindness*, Books 1-2. Translated by Alexandra Barratt (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1991). *Gertrude of Helfta Spiritual Exercises*, translated by Gertrud Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1989). I have made a few translation changes. Her feast day is November 16.

ⁱ See, <https://predmore.blogspot.com/2015/12/poem-advent-by-jessica-powers.html>