

CHRISTMAS DAY 2018
St George's Windsor

**Once more you climb down from the cross
Back through the thirty years and lie
Within a young girl's large embrace
And warmed by wonder.**

The words come from the beginning of a poem by Elizabeth Jennings.

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The poet Elizabeth Jennings, having endured serious mental illness for many years, became, in later life, increasingly eccentric. Seen as an undesirable 'bag lady', she was banned from some Oxford hotels and cafes near where she lived; that is until their proprietors discovered that she was a celebrated literary figure whose presence might even be good for business! Anyway, when in 2001 she died, a distinguished publisher and critic wrote of this vulnerable woman that she "was the most unconditionally loved writer of her generation". Certainly, she had composed many poems and had written many books that had found a positive response in her thousands of devoted readers.

Christmas was always a magical season for Elizabeth Jennings, and is a subject to which she returned from time to time in her writing. I think it probably reminded her of the untroubled years of her very early childhood. However, a devout (if in some ways unconventional) Christian, she was drawn by more than nostalgia to this yearly celebration. She wanted to unearth the 'truth' of it; discover just what it could mean.

The lines that I quoted earlier come from the poem **Christmas 1974**. It is a brief and, at first glance anyway, very simple poem. The first lines lure us, in our imagination, all the way back from Christ's death to his birth.

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Now, through our mind's eye, at Bethlehem we see a tranquil scene which, like all peaceful prospects, evokes in us a touch of hope for our often noisy, brutal world. The poet goes on:

Stars are high,

**The air is quiet. War has drawn back
An hour or two. The soldiers sleep.
This birth lights up the centuries' dark.**

It is true that in Mary's heart there is some foreboding. However, just for now she can savour the precious moment. And so the poem concludes:

**She knows that you must suffer, yet
Perhaps she too fills out this hour
When love and innocence have met
And God himself puts off his power.**

I said earlier that it was more than nostalgia that drew Elizabeth Jennings to this yearly celebration. I said that she wanted to unearth the 'truth' of it; discover just what it could mean.

Very often, it is the final line of a poem that discloses most what the poet wishes us to hear. Elizabeth Jennings, exploring what might be the essence of the Christmas message, the truth and meaning of it, ends her poem by saying that this is the hour when:

... God himself puts off his power.

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Our tradition has it that, when the time came for God to reveal his nature through the life of a human being, God did not do so through one whom we might call 'powerful' in any conventional sense. Born in a cattle shed of temporarily homeless parents, Jesus was to live the whole of his life, so far as it is known to us, as an outcast from respectable and influential society, and to end his earthly days upon a cross, in some ways just as helpless as a new born baby. Whether it be of birth or death, his hour is the hour when:

... God himself puts off his power.

If Jesus Christ did not seek to control, curb, restrain, force, intimidate, or compel others to obey, and if Jesus Christ truly does show to us 'God' and God's mode of operation, then surely we must learn the lesson that God works in ways that seem entirely strange to those who crave only for status and kudos. We see that in Jesus Christ, at each and every hour:

... God himself puts off his power.

It is this truth and meaning – this mystery - to which Elizabeth Jennings directs our attention. But if God really does relinquish power (power as we usually understand it), what remains? Again, we look to Jesus Christ for an answer. And we see that being in no way coercive, he yet consistently 'appealed' to his hearers to exercise humility, and to place themselves (even 'sacrificially') at the disposal of their neighbours.

Perhaps God comes to us as an 'appeal' to our conscience, as a call to us to be more careful of each other and less protective of ourselves. Perhaps God comes to us as a kind of prompting to the heart to be more gentle and compassionate. Perhaps God comes to us as an inner voice pleading with us to turn our backs upon all that is ruthless, aggressive and greedily ambitious. Perhaps God comes to us as a voice inviting us to share in his divine self-giving. This voice can be heard alike by non-believers, half believers and believers to have the ring of truth about it. Maybe this voice is heard especially at Christmastime; that special hour when even:

.... God himself puts off his power.

Of course, though we might sense God's appeal to us today, tomorrow is another matter. We shall return to what we short-sightedly believe to be the 'real world'; that world in which, at both personal and public levels, people like to flex their muscle, guard their rights, watch their backs, jockey for position, thrust ahead of others, and seek prestige, and recognition. But maybe some echo of the Christmas truth will linger, as if to remind us of something that deep-down we surely know already, that even our most modest acts of self-forgetful kindness are deeds that have more significance than any self-regarding works, and will prove to be the seeds that grow into the 'really real world' – the world that God, whose strength must lie in his patience, is waiting for, and for which, in our hearts, we truly long.

I am pleased that this sermon should have come about as a result of some listening to one who was later to be seen as an undesirable, vulnerable, eccentric 'bag lady'. Somehow, it puts things in perspective.

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The Right Reverend David Conner, KVCO

