

It's always a little nervy to recite the Christmas Gospel from memory. It does however bring the text to life for me, and possibly for you as well. Memorization forces me to internalize the content of what I recite. The process of memorization itself requires that I understand the words and phrases in order to remember truthfully.

Forty years ago, as a student at St. Michael's School in Oak Bay every Wednesday afternoon we had repetition class. Standing before eager peer critics we struggled through portions of THE WALRUS AND THE CARPENTER, TIGER, TIGER BURNING RIGHT, and THE CHARGE OF THE LIGHT BRIGADE. I had absolutely no understanding of the poems themselves; just a desperate need to utter at least half of the correct words. I think I did better tonight, with what is a seminal Christmas text, the *Word became flesh, and lived among us*. That's the reason for the season. God enfleshed, in space, time and circumstance.

As with all religion, including Christian faith, the challenge is to take what is outside the body, inside, in order to enter into the very heart of the matter. *We have seen his Glory, full of grace and truth.*

How then do we appropriate these Christmas texts for our selves and our lives? How does hearing something inspire us and to what sort of action? How does this particular story connect with our work and our lives? I have three suggestions, through Memory, Reason and Skill.

Humans have a special ability to combine memory with insight. In a bad sense, we are capable of prejudice and grudge. How often must we work, at times strenuously, to eliminate hurtful phrases, injurious actions and raw emotions from our psychological hard-drive. In a good sense, we are traditional beings who value customs, stories and past events. Birthdays and funerals alike are helpful rites. Lets choose the good over the bad and remember together the events of Christmas as told by John's gospel. God . . . while present at the creation of the world, is specially present in the person of Jesus Christ, here called the WORD (with a capital W). He is born into the culture and history of the ancient Middle East and at the same time the creator of everything. So . . . we scratch our heads . . . as we behold a miracle, something not capable of a logical explanation.

More clearly, and throughout his short life, Jesus, the WORD was healer, teacher, debater, and all-round perfect human being. It is not so much in understanding the "how" and "why" of Jesus that convinces us of his merit. It is in his actions in the community of humans that we see his light shine most brightly. So don't get stuck at Christmas. Its not the whole story, nor I dare say, the most important part of the story. Read and learn the whole story so you can remember it. Gather it alongside your other most intimate and important memories. Shift it from outside to inside.

So if memory encourages us, what of reason? Reason involves the intellect, our capacity to question and work things out for ourselves. Reason involves putting aside childish things so that more mature matters can be discussed, considered and acted upon. Sadly, lots of folks never get beyond an infantile engagement with

Christmas. The annual Children's Christmas Pageant may not be the best way to portray these great and grand truths. We need poetry, fine art, music of course, well wrought drama and a discipline of curious reading to draw us deeper into the mystery of God's love in action.

Christian faith is an experience, which ought to move and challenge us. But it is also a way of appreciating and understanding the way things are. Reason helps us determine the nature of God's presence in our midst. Reason affords us a divine reality check as to the way things really are, and how they could be! Reason allows us to encounter God-in-creation in a fresh and vital way.

So with memory and reason behind us, we are left with the third leg of the stool, skill. Skill relates to our vocation, the mosaic of all our desires, abilities, opportunities, inclinations, and talents. Whether in the realm of kitchen, school, stage, or workbench, we are all skilled. Much of life involves getting ourselves into the right space for our skills to foster and bloom.

One of the best features of Christianity which differs from other religions is that Christ assumed human form in Christ. He became a worker, just like you and me. He woke; He slept; He laboured; He rested. His humanity was couched in a carpenter's trade. Jesus can relate to our delights as well as commiserate with our fatigue. With us, he developed skill over time, but he is remembered less for his skill as for his vocation, as a human being perfectly attuned to the will and desire of God, who he called "Father."

Can you imagine a way of living for yourself, where you are similarly attuned to a divine presence, even in the midst of daily chores. Some would call this slavery; a counsellor might call it a psychosis; I will call it respect. Such respect is grounded in gratitude, and gratitude is not a part-time affair.

Because I honestly believe with John's Gospel that Christ is the creator and sustainer of the cosmos, then I can at the very least express gratitude for this amazing creation and sustaining presence, specially through my vocation as a priest, father, husband, musician and photographer.

To be aware of the role that memory, reason and skill play in our lives is to open up a very large circle. Until now, the circle has been closed. With ourselves at the centre, our world is a closed system. We find ourselves horribly alone! Every once in a while as opportunity permits, we open up the circle to let some friends, family, neighbours and on occasion a stranger in . . . And then we close it up again. Every once in a while, usually when we face illness or other life threats we let God in.

When we remember more widely and carefully, when we think things through more thoroughly, and when we link our work with our devotion, the circle explodes open, possibly for an entire lifetime. Literally, we stop going around in circles and now move along a path, a path towards healing, insight, strength, justice, and peacemaking.

Let us all make this journey, together.