

Behold your God

The year was 1996 and Feargal Keane was a journalist working as a BBC foreign correspondent. His wife had just given birth to their firstborn child and as he sat in his hotel room he wrote 'Letter to Daniel', addressing the infant who lay in his arms.

'My dear son, it is six o'clock in the morning on the island of Hong Kong. You are asleep cradled in my left arm and I am learning the art of one handed typing. Your mother, more tired yet more happy than I've ever known her, is sound asleep in the room next door and there is a soft quiet in our apartment.' What follows in the letter is Keane's reflection on bringing a life into the world, a world whose very excesses and horrors Keane had witnessed in his work in regions of conflict and war. He says at one point, 'I am pained perhaps haunted is a better word, by the memory, suddenly so vivid now, of each suffering child I have come across on my journeys. To tell you the truth it's nearly too much to bear at the moment to even think of you being hurt and abused.' He then recalls some of the terrors he has seen and speaks of the fierce protectiveness he feels for little Daniel who he holds. On the morning when the item was first broadcast, cars were pulling over and off motorways, so moved were the drivers listening to Keane's words.

Perhaps some of us who are fortunate enough to be parents can appreciate what Keane was feeling. As parents we know that sense of a child's frightening vulnerability and that deep biological urge to protect at all costs. There is the conviction that we would readily yield our own lives if that was needed to spare the life of our child, or even to protect them from injury. It is, indeed, too much to even contemplate that little bundle of life suffering harm.

I imagine that is what Mary felt that night in the stable. She had already made the long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a dangerous and risky business in the last throes of pregnancy. How she must have feared for her child's safety. How she must have dreaded a miscarriage on the open road. And then there had been the ordeal of giving birth in the squalid surroundings of the animal quarters, amid the muck and the dirt. Mary's maternal instinct must have been in overdrive: how tenderly and yet fiercely she must have clutched her suckling baby to her breast. And no doubt that protectiveness:

would have been heightened by the awareness that his child was special, different. His would be no ordinary life. He was destined to transform the world, and that is always a dangerous vocation when there are powerful forces at work whose interests lie in the status quo. And if we had read on we would have read of the backlash by those forces of resistance. We would have read of the tyrant King Herod who, on hearing of what he took to be a threat to his throne, had every child in the region under two years of age murdered. And so Mary sits, as the shepherds gather around, and she enfolds her baby in her arms.

As we ponder this scene, over 2000 years later, what is so staggering for those of us who name ourselves Christians is that what we have here in this little, vulnerable baby, cradled by a protective mother, is an image of God. Think about that. We live, of course, in sceptical times. We live in secular times when it is a mark of our sophistication that we have outgrown faith and given up belief in God and we are far better off without him. But be careful of which God it is that we are discarding. If the God who we reject is the detached, safe God who sits enthroned over creation, tinkering occasionally with its workings and dabbling in its life then let's get rid of such an irrelevance and the sooner the better. And if the God who we reject is some unfeeling, dispassionate killjoy before whom we must bow just because he insists that we do then forget it, we are well rid of such a delusion. And if the God who we banish is one who is immune to human cries and tears, or who doesn't seem to care enough to do much about them, then let's dance on his grave.

But let me tell you why I am a Christian. Let me tell you why I cling to this belief even though it's stretched to breaking point at times. I believe because this is a God unlike any other. This is a God who has become deeply vulnerable, a baby sucking at a mother's breast, an infant held protectively in his mother's arms. This is a God who takes on flesh and blood and bone and comes amongst us, sharing our life and our joys and our sorrows. This is a God who – incredibly – is the Creator and Sustainer of all things and yet who is born amongst us, evoking a mother's deepest protective, maternal instincts. This is a God who knows life from the inside – and indeed not just from the inside but from the underside, from the side of the poor and the dispossessed and the suffering and the ones whose experience of life is a taste of hell. And that's the only kind of God I'm interested in.

Feargal Keane concludes his Letter to Daniel on a hopeful note. Addressing his son, he concludes by speaking of ‘the sound of hope and new beginnings, that you and all of your innocence have brought to the world.’ I wish that were always the case. I wish that every child’s birth in innocence heralded hope and newness, but sadly that is not true. Thinking about Fearga Keane and his letter to his son, indeed what brought it to mind, was the terrible, heart-breaking picture of that little boy earlier this year, that three year old refugee Aylan Kurdi lying face-down in the surf in Turkey. His birth, his young life did not bring hope and new beginnings. His innocence evoked no newness but Herod’s world of the massacre of innocents. His parents could not protect him from such a world.

Tonight, in the festivities and celebrations of Christmas, we recognise that such a world needs saving. Such a world cries out for salvation. And as Christians we say that the birth of this child is different. As Christians we can say to this child, this infant born in that stable 2,000 years ago, that it is indeed ‘the sound of hope and new beginnings that you and all of your innocence have brought to the world.’ The good news of Christmas is that we can gather round that mother, clutching her vulnerable child in the stable, and we can say ‘behold your God!’ Here is God, as a baby, coming to save. Let us worship Amen.

O God,
Hold tight your world tonight.
Hold tight those who are vulnerable,
those who feel the world’s cold shoulder.
We pray for the refugee and the asylum seeker,
that they may find security and somewhere
they can call home.
We pray for those war-torn regions
where human capacity for hatred and brutality
are openly displayed,

and we pray for peace and reconciliation.
And we pray especially for children – the most vulnerable.
We pray for children become orphans as a result of war;
We pray for children become soldiers,
and denied the innocence of childhood;
we pray for children abused, victims of an adult world
which has lost the capacity for being childlike;
we pray for children who are denied education,
denied opportunity, denied their childhood.
O God, at the first Christmas the angels sang of
Peace and goodwill among the people.
Bring peace, we pray, to your world.
And God, hold tight tonight those we know
who are in special need.
In a moment of silence we hold before you those
we know who are on our hearts tonight –
those with whom we rejoice because of good things
that have happened to them,
and those with whom we grieve because
they grieve...
O God, hold tight your world tonight,
as Mary held tight her firstborn,
and grant to it all the blessing that came
in Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Amen.

Generous God,
Your gifts and your grace are crowned
In the giving of Jesus, the baby born in Bethlehem.
He came to bring your rule to bear on your world;
Grant that these offerings may be used
For the coming of your realm
And to the glory of your name. Amen