

Christmas Eve 2017

One of the great ladies of Greenwood is reported to have expressed, in recent weeks, some disappointment in her husband's holiday performance. I imagine has worked until at least 6 most nights (not exactly rushing home to decorate) and hunted early on Saturday mornings.

(I don't hunt, so you know this isn't me!)

He has raked leaves and cleaned gutters on Saturday afternoons.

He has not kept the late hours she has, choosing, ordering, wrapping, and baking.

Reviewing all this, she said to a friend, if the Buddhists are right,

truly, she hoped to come back in her next life as a man at Christmas.

There is nothing, she said, so useless, as a man, this time of year.

My brothers, don't we know it?

It must be admitted that most of you are not trying very hard to help, and when you do, you are messing things up.

My brother Jon Newlon gave his beautiful young bride, early in their marriage, a vacuum cleaner.

That was a tough Christmas for Jon, I imagine. Maybe even the first quarter.

She has since taught him that *impracticality* is an essential aspect of a gift.

I made a terrible hash of my attempt to help with Christmas cards,

And I am not allowed to put the lights on the tree after the year ***of which we will not speak.***

There is nothing so useless, the lady said, as a man at Christmas. Maybe she is right.

The story of the Lord's birth is the story of a birth. Don't miss that.

It is a birth, another place where a man is pretty useless, unless he is John Russell.

And even that is a new phenomenon; women assisted women on the birthing stool for millennia, until the advent of modern obstetrics.

St. Luke doesn't tell us of a midwife, and perhaps the Blessed Virgin had no need of one; maybe she bore him into the world unassisted.

No matter; it was a birth, and like all births, the main work was hers.

The work her body had been doing for nine months' time culminating in a great ordeal, something physically and emotionally draining that only she could do.

Not Joseph's work and not that of any other man;

the contractions of her womb would bear the incarnate God into the world.

Does that seem too visceral?

Other parts of the story may tempt us;

we like the angels (bright wings, celestial light, very spiritual)

Or the shepherds (sturdy, manly, protective, like Joseph)

We like to speak of grace and truth and the coming of God into the world.

But let us not get too high-minded and let us not move into the intellectual ether too soon.

We mark tonight the birth of child, born as all are, out of the body of a woman.

It was an earthy, messy, beautiful, incarnate moment, like every birth,

a moment that reminds any man who witnesses it of his small place in the great affairs of humanity.

The earthy, fleshly aspects of this feast are what undergirds its persistent extension. The great feast of family, of winter warmth, of baking, of table, of gift-giving; all this is built on the fact that we mark a birth tonight, an en-fleshing, a life-giving that which only a woman, in the power of God, could do.

It is no wonder that the world has claimed this feast.

They do not know what to do with Pentecost or even Easter, which speak of the spirit in ways not so readily translated to the home and family and neighborhood.

This feast, the feast of a woman, bearing a child, claims us all and claims us at table, and in our bedrooms, and wherever an incarnate love is shared by those made and made new in God's image by this birth.

For truly the Word has taken flesh by the hospitality of a virgin pure.

We are all useless, frankly, before her gift and the gift of God through her.

We are all here to receive him and the grace upon grace that is his, for us.