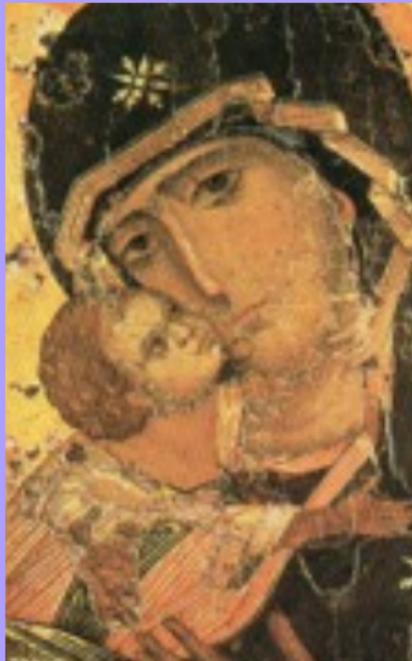


THE CLOSENESS OF GOD'S COMING



Three Meditations for Advent before the
Icon of the Mother of God of Tenderness

Peter Sills

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Mother of God of Tenderness
Vladimir 12th Century – artist unknown

- I -

*Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion; for lo,
I come and I will dwell in the midst of you.*

Zechariah 2.10 RSV

An icon is a glimpse into heaven. It is painted out of prayer; it is made to be venerated. Like any true work of art it is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. The 12th century artist who painted this icon in Vladimir, one of the cities of the golden ring in Russia, offers us not just a beautiful picture, but a way of entering into the mystery of the incarnation. He says in images what the prophet says in words:

Behold, a young woman is with child, and she will give
birth to a son, and call him Immanuel. *Isaiah 7.14*

The incarnation is about the closeness of God's coming in love. Closeness is something we need in order to grow, but its blessings can be mixed. Closeness brings comfort, but it can also disturb. Closeness has to be accepted; there is no meeting it half way. If love is not accepted the lover will feel rejected: his fate depends on the response of the beloved. And saying 'Yes' to love means not only receiving but giving; lover and beloved share their lives both in sorrow and in joy. So it is with God's coming close: it depends upon our response and our willingness to give.

Mary's 'Yes' to God brought her wonderfully close to him, as we see in the icon. But this was a closeness that brought both joy and sorrow. To both she gave herself, sharing both the divine sorrows and the divine joys. As the story of God's coming unfolds the mood changes. when the angel Gabriel first appears to her, Mary is alarmed. 'How can this be...?' she cries, and then, reassured, her alarm changes into acceptance, and then into joy: 'My soul magnifies the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my saviour!' In Advent we look forward to an experience of the same joy in the celebration of Christmas. Too often we leave it there, but saying 'Yes' to God means wanting this joy to grow into a burning inside us, such as Clopas and his companion felt on the road to Emmaus. If this is not our desire, maybe we should ask how close we have let God come to us.

Mary's sorrow came later, most of all at the cross. Mary was forewarned of this when she and Joseph met Simeon in the Temple:

This child is destined to be a sign that will be rejected;
and you too will be pierced to the heart. *Luke 2.34*

As Mary holds her child in the icon, the artist has put that sorrow in her eyes. Cardinal Hume made a moving personal appeal on television in 1989 for the starving people of Ethiopia. He had seen the tragedy as God sees it, and the same sorrow was in his eyes. It is the sorrow of God: those who let God come close look upon the world with God's eyes. What do others see in our eyes? Saying 'Yes' to God means allowing ourselves to feel the pain of the world, and to feel it deeply so that familiarity will not dull it.

Before God comes close to us in his Son, he first came close to Mary. The orthodox, who gave us this icon, speak of Mary as the mother of God, *theotokos*, literally 'the God-bearer'. Orthodox spirituality is about making every believer a God-bearer, and a feature of the Russian church is the *poustinia*, a secluded place like a cabin in the forest, or a special room in the house, where the believer can go to be alone with God. In reading and meditation the *poustinik* creates within him- or herself a secluded place where God is always with them. In a mystical way God comes close to them deep in their hearts just as he became incarnate in Mary. More and more I am convinced that this is the true object and meaning of prayer, and it brings a joy that cannot be taken away. The believer becomes, like Mary, a God-bearer, and thereafter she or he carries God with them amidst the pain of the world, living their lives as before but knowing in deep faith that into all their encounters they bring Christ.

The world desperately needs more Christians who, like Mary, let God come close to them and embrace him; who will, as it were, accept God as their lover and let his Son be born in their hearts and bring joy to the world. Advent is a time to begin making a *poustinia* in your heart.

– II –

*For to us a child is born, to us a Son is given;
and the government will be upon his shoulder.*

Isaiah 9.6 RSV

When God came close to us in Jesus he came as a babe in arms, born not in a palace amid silks and satins, but in a cave where the animals sheltered. The artist has painted him cradled in his mother's arms, lying against her cheek and her breast. The icon captures the closeness of the bond between mother and child, a closeness that protects, for children are vulnerable, and which helps them to grow. This picture of God as a vulnerable child confounds other images of God with which we may have grown up – the God of wrath governing us through fear; or God the insurer to be turned to when things have gone wrong, but otherwise forgotten; or God the guru telling us what to do at every moment of our lives and relieving us of responsibility. A baby does none of these things, and neither does Jesus. Instead he stands like a guest knocking at the door, inviting us to ask him in. His invitation is really a way of asking us to be clear about what is most important in our lives: is it him or something else? What gives us meaning and purpose? What shall we become?

Becoming is one thing our society takes seriously. From an early age children are encouraged to think about what they want to be, and appropriate choices in education and training are made. In later life we reflect on what we have become:

have we achieved our goals of health, wealth and happiness? Becoming a God-bearer is not necessarily opposed to success in the world, but it does mean allowing oneself to grow in a particular way – a way in which health, wealth and happiness are received as gifts, rather than claimed, or fought for, as rights. It also means receiving whatever else life may bring, including pain and sorrows, as gifts. This kind of growing, needless to say, is easier said than done. And it cannot be done apart from God; with him it can only be done in the poverty of our hearts, but only if we are prepared to yield to him not only as our lover, but as our judge.

When Mary and Joseph took Jesus to the Temple to make the prescribed offerings for a first-born son, they met Simeon. He took the babe in his arms and blessed them and said that the child was destined to be a sign which men would reject. Many in Israel would stand or fall because of him, and the secret thoughts of many would be laid bare. (*Luke 2.34, 35*) When God comes close it is a time of judgement. Later in his life Jesus himself said that in the Kingdom, the time of God's coming in its fullness, there is nothing hidden that will not be made public, nothing under cover that will not be made known and brought into the open. Too much of human life is about keeping things covered up, about image and keeping up appearances, about not facing the dark side of our nature. It is though we fear that if God knows all he will not forgive all. The contrary is the truth. Real forgiveness is only possible when there is complete openness. Only when all is known can all be forgiven. God's judgement, unlike our human judgement, is not about condemnation but salvation. This is the great insight of St John:

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that everyone who has faith in him may not perish but have eternal life. It was not to judge the world that God sent his Son into the world, but that through him the world might be saved.

John 3.16, 17

Salvation and judgement are two sides of the same coin. As we look at the child resting on Mary's breast, we see the sign by which we shall stand or fall. God's judgement is that of the child who sees things in their simplicity rather than in their complexity, and who's love is generously given in salvation.

If Jesus is to be our guest, coming so close that his love warms us and helps us to grow, we have to make room for him. In the solitude of our poustinia we have to let his light not only illuminate our darkness, but overcome it. It is our secret thoughts that must be laid bare. This part of the spiritual journey is often the hardest, but the journey may be made easier if we remember that God came among us as a child, and if we practise the child-like virtues: to be open and ingenuous about ourselves; to accept life gladly as a gift; to rejoice in the given moment; and to have a believing heart. Jesus said, 'the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I tell you: whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will never enter it.' (*Mark 10.14b, 15*)

– III –

*In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*

Isaiah 40.3

The relationship between mother and child goes deep. It is formed instinctively, long before communication in words is possible. It is an intuitive, felt relationship, and upon it much of our future growth depends. Like the relationship between lovers, that between mother and child is one of communion, and it is that quality which the artist conveys in his icon. Through the incarnation we learn that the experience of human love is a sign and foretaste of God's divine love, the love that beheld our unformed substance and which knitted us together in our mother's womb. (*Cf. Psalm 139.13*) The love in which 'we live and move and have our being.' (*Acts 17.28*) Entering into a deep and wordless communion with this love is both the way and the end of the poustinia of the heart.

It was God's gift of his son that opened up the way and guaranteed the end. His way is the highway to God. It does not depend on observing a given ritual, nor on the meticulous keeping of rules, but on accepting God's free grace. God's greatest, and most gracious gift, is the forgiveness of sins, through which the obstacles in the highway are cleared away. In this icon, it seems to me, the artist offers the mother as an image of God, an image echoed by his English contemporary,

Julian of Norwich: 'As truly as God is our father, so just as truly is he our mother. In our father, God Almighty, we have our being; in our merciful mother we are made and restored.' (*Revelations of Divine Love*) The tenderness of the mother's embrace says much about God's forgiveness, and the closeness of the child to her says much about its effect. The movement in the icon is from the mother's eyes to her arms embracing her child to his arm encircling her neck. God holds us like our mother, and we instinctively cling to him.

This closeness of parent and child goes beyond care and nurture and becomes identity. Children are an intriguing and seamless mixture of both their parents. The one can be seen in the other. Jesus picked up this image when he responded to Philip's request that he show them the Father: 'Have I been all this time with you Philip, and still you do not know me? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. Then how can you say, "Show us the Father"? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in me?' (*John 14.9, 10*) Jesus is the icon of God, and in God there is no un-Christlikeness. Later in this farewell discourse he promises his disciples the same closeness to himself as he has to the Father: 'If you heed my commands, you will dwell in my love, as I have heeded my Father's commands and dwell in his love.' (*John 15.10*) It is a promise made to all, not just to the chosen few. Everyone may experience the closeness of God; everyone may hear his word spoken personally to them. His way is a highway, and all may travel along it.

Keeping Christ's commands, the one condition of this promise, is not about obeying a precise set of religious rules,

but about keeping the highway straight, co-operating with God as he seeks to come close. This making straight requires something like a desert, a place and a time of silence with no distractions, where we can be with God alone. In Christian spirituality the desert is the place of close encounter with God. It was to the desert that some of the first Christian holy men went to hear God's word, the still, small voice that came to Elijah alone on Mount Horeb. That word is drowned out by the clamour of voices in the world offering so many different meanings of life that none in fact can be heard. Creating a poustinia for yourself is about creating your own desert space wherein God's highway to you will be made straight. Walking this highway will be a time of testing, a time in which both joy and sorrow will be deepened – the desert is a place of judgement as well as salvation – but its end is the embrace of God, and the same wordless, intuitive relationship which a child enjoys with his mother. God's fire will be kindled in your heart, and, like Mary in the icon, you will be wonderfully close to Christ but looking with compassion on his world.