



The Slow Stride of Incarnation

- *brother Peter*

I THOUGHT MY SPANISH WAS PRETTY GOOD UNTIL I TRIED to listen to a news broadcast in Mexico. The news anchor spoke so breathlessly fast, one item tumbling out after another, that I barely got a word. Back home in Weston, fresh from this experience—though I had not noticed it before—I found when I paid attention that our English news broadcasters are just as fast, cramming without pause as many items as possible into the minutes allotted. A non-English speaker would be hard put to comprehend a word.

I have been impressed at times in watching some nature videos using time-lapse photography to see all four seasons in a given scene condensed into a few minutes' span of time. The speeding up of so many human experiences of encounter are facilitated now with so many technologies: Fiber optics, Broadband, Tweeting, Texting, Social Networking, and Smart Phones. Along with this, we have come to crave instantaneous and unlimited access.

A contrasting approach to human interaction arose recently when I accompanied brother Robert to an audiology exam. The doctor underlined the importance of speaking slowly and with face to face communication for someone with a hearing impairment. Diminished and distorted sound can be improved with visual clues and enough time for the brain to make the connections between the sound of words and the meaning of words.

Our common prayer at the priory benefits from such an approach. In a monastic setting, either in choir or sitting in a semi-circle, we face each other for prayer or reflective exchange. We try to discipline ourselves to

pause and listen, to be aware of each other and the environment of the moment. At our Morning Vigil Prayer, for instance, we begin in a darkened chapel with the playing of drums, of a rain stick, and of a wooden flute, and the lighting of one large candle in the center of our prayer space. We are surrounded by the sounds of earth—the heartbeat of the world, the falling rain, a gentle bird-song—and embraced by the coming of light. The readings and psalmody are unhurried and calm. There is a mantra-like meditation song interspersed with melodious humming and simple guitar interludes—the words are few and softly repeated. The ambiance invites us to receive and interiorize the experience of presence to each other and to God. Our senses, our hearts and our minds are fully engaged in this peaceful, timeless moment of human contact and prayer.

Our world has immense possibilities, undreamed-of technological advances, and fast access to all we need. We can be thankful for all the gains of contemporary life. Yet nature has its measured, time-bound processes which have their own profound joys and wisdom. Prayer is not enhanced in being speeded-up. Our monastic prayer can be beneficial in slowing us down to a more human and humane experience of life and communication with others, with nature, and with God. Our senses and our spirits need enough time to see and appreciate the nuanced features of nature and of persons, to hear musical sounds interplay with each other, to deliberately taste and enjoy the food we eat, to sense the gentle breeze and the warmth of a summer day or the cold of winter on our skin, and to breathe in the fragrances of the seasons as they unfold organically over their natural span of time.

The Advent and Christmas seasons of the church's liturgical year invite us to just such an unhurried pace in our prayer and reflection on the events of Christ's life. One morning at our Vigils Prayer a section of the reading of the day from the letter to the Romans stood out for me:

... the gospel concerning God's Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord . . . ¹

It was at the completion of Jesus' human life, lived moment by moment in the faithful love of God and his brothers and sisters, that he was "declared to be Son of God." The Word was made flesh, was incarnated, over the duration of Jesus' lifetime. Jesus embodied the presence of God through the full extent of his human life, from the time of his birth through his crucifixion and resurrection. He was recognized as the Son of God at the conclusion of his earthly life. The experience of Incarnation cannot be accelerated.

At Christmas time we are invited to engage the slow stride of incarnation, to embody the presence of Christ from moment to moment through the length of our lives until the end. ■

¹ Rom. 1: 3-4