

Doesn't the tinsel seem to go up earlier and earlier each year? "Christmas is for children" seems to be the marketing motto. They deserve the latest Ben Ten gadget! If you love them you'll give them our product! The whole hoopla of merchandising that starts in October revolves around presents and Santa. I've come to think that in my head there almost seem to be two Christmases: the commercial season and the Christian celebration of the Incarnation.

In the malls, Jesus has been efficiently banished from the process in the quest for political correctness. Mostly it's Santa and snowmen and Boney M's Little Drummer Boy over and over again, which is going to send me to Town Hill one day. If the nativity is touched on at all, it is ever so cute – the little baby in the manger, the wise men and the ox and lamb.

Christmas is for children. Is it? When I watched my niece's baptism some time ago, I was acutely aware of the fact that as she was anointed and blessed and welcomed into the family of God that this was the beginning of her eternal life, but it also came home to me with a bit of a shock that her birth had set her on a path which would end in her death. It seems obvious, but we don't think about that too often, do we?

If we think about it, we DO need to start out in life with the end in mind. The end. Our eternal life. After all, isn't that the whole point? What was the end in mind when that baby was born just over 2000 years ago?

John tells us "the word was made flesh". What was the process of that becoming flesh? Any woman who has ever given birth, or those men who have been part of the process of birth with their partners will tell you that childbirth is painful, messy business, often hours and hours of it. Christ was born in pain, with bloodshed, with struggle. He died in pain, with bloodshed, with struggle. I would wager that Mary did NOT look the way they portray her in the religious paintings, all serene and perfectly turned out in a fetching blue and white outfit.

When I was a child, I had great sympathy for Mary, because she was being jolted around on a donkey in her condition. What was even worse was that I thought her baby was overdue – which I had understood by the line "Late in time behold him come" in the carol "Hark the Herald Angels Sing".

Mary's life was a struggle with suffering, which ultimately had meaning. A pregnant unmarried woman, she would have been ostracised by her community, which must have been very hard, even if Joseph supported her. She suffered the physical hardship of birth, not with her mother, a midwife or the women of her community at home, but in a strange town, in a smelly stable far from home, with her husband, for whom the process of childbirth was probably terrifying.

It was her first childbirth, and she was very likely as frightened as he was. They say the powerful contractions of childbirth are equally painful for the child, so Christ, the creator of the universe, suffered too. This was no peaceful manger scene. This was trauma. The birth of her child in a strange town, separated from her community, then having to flee to Egypt was probably only the beginning of a life where Mary's family was set apart, culminating in her son's becoming an itinerant preacher. He increasingly angered the religious authorities and was eventually executed for his audacity.

In Luke's account of the story, Mary was warned by Simeon that she, too, would suffer - a sword would pierce her soul. For her, the sufferings of watching her child grow up and be executed before he *himself* could marry and have children had meaning. It had meaning because it was the will of God - as revealed by the angel at Jesus' conception: he would be called the son of the Most High. It was for suffering that Jesus was born.

Isaiah 53:5 - But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.

We are called to look at birth with the end in sight, as Mary was made to do. The physical confinement for Christ of the pregnancy echoes the physical confinement of the tomb at the end of Christ's life. But he escaped that tomb, in his resurrection. And in his resurrection we escape the tomb. We are given eternal life. It is a victory for the world - the meaning of Christmas.

We are challenged to see our humanity with new eyes. The very nature of being human involves suffering. There was an article in the Star a few years ago that startled me and I have never forgotten it. It proposed that there is danger in the current belief that suffering is abnormal. The writer suggested rather that life is made up of both joy and suffering, but we mistakenly believe that suffering should be avoided at all costs.

She went on to say that we have a society that actively avoids emotional and physical discomfort, as if it is a pathology that needs to be cured. We use pills, popular psychology and overconsumption to hide from the dual nature of our lives.

This is not to say that serious emotional problems, illness and physical discomfort should not need intervention. Not at all. But the very nature of life in this fallen world involves some level of suffering. A woman bedridden with an incurable but not fatal illness writes that suffering has meaning for her: "Like the coloured threads of an embroidered picture, there have to be dark threads to give shape and form amongst the light and colour. All is valid. Even pain and anguish - especially pain and anguish".

Jesus did not promise that following him meant an escape from the troubles of the world. On the contrary, in John 16:33, we are told by Christ that "In this world you will have trouble." Then he encourages us: "But take heart! I have overcome the world". We are called into a greater depth of existence: to have life to the full - in John 10:10, we hear the well-loved words "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full".

It is important to know that Jesus does not abandon us in our suffering. The story of the road to Emmaus is a picture of Jesus walking alongside the grief-stricken disciples. He did not reveal himself at first, but remained silent and allowed them to unburden themselves at the loss of their master. Only then, did he break bread with them and send them back in joy at having seen Jesus alive again. Christ walks alongside us in our suffering.

Jesus was flesh as we are flesh – not some abstract God for whom life was easy. He shared in our humanity – he loved, laughed, wept, mourned. He suffered. What meaning does God have for us who suffer? Just this: Jesus suffered too. He mourned the loss of his dear friend Lazarus. He was abandoned by his closest friends, one of whom betrayed him. He struggled with loneliness in the Garden of Gethsemane. He suffered the agonies of Roman torture, which culminated in the cruelty of the cross. He called out in the depths of despair from the cross: why have you forsaken me?

People ask how a God of love could allow suffering to happen. We don't know the answer to that, but we do know that God is able to transform our suffering and allow us to use it to help others. Paul says in the second letter to the Corinthians Chapter 1 v 4– “God comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God”. Theresa of Avila's first experience in the mystical life began with a severe illness. She went on to write “The Interior Castle”, which has led countless Christians into a deeper relationship with God. Some of us have done an Open Door Retreat, based on the exercises of St Ignatius. St Ignatius was quite a wild young man who turned to God only when he had nothing else to do but read and think because he was confined to his bed with a serious leg fracture.

I'd like to share a remarkable story with you. Victor Frankl was a Jewish psychologist who spent three years as a prisoner in appalling conditions in four different Nazi concentration camps. Only one in twenty people returned from those camps. He narrowly escaped death as he was not a strong man, and weak prisoners were sent to the gas chambers when they were useless for manual labour. Countless people died by freezing, starvation or typhoid. Afterwards, Dr Frankl wrote a book called “Man's search for Meaning”, in which he analysed his experiences and asked why some people literally gave up and died, and why others made it. He concluded that man has amazing powers of endurance so long as it makes sense to him to go on living: “He who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*” In other words, the people who had something to hold on to, to look forward to, to hope for, survived. There was meaning in suffering for them. Those who had no hope, perished.

On one particularly bad day when morale was very low in the camp, he was asked by a prisoner to address the other sick, weak prisoners who were lying in the dark hut on tall stacks of straw bunk beds with vermin-infested straw mattresses. They were desperate, on the point of giving up. Prisoners were driven to throw themselves on the electric fence to end their misery. Dr Frankl spoke for some time. I quote from his book: “then I spoke of the many opportunities of giving life a meaning. I told my comrades (who lay motionless, although occasionally a sigh could be heard) that a human life, under any circumstances,

never ceases to have a meaning, and that this infinite meaning of life includes suffering and dying, privation and death.”

“I asked the poor creatures who listened to me attentively in the darkness of the hut to face up to the seriousness of our position. They must not lose hope but should keep their courage in the certainty that the hopelessness of our struggle does not detract from its dignity and its meaning.” His talk that day gave hope to many desperate people. In fact, the end of the war was just around the corner, and they were released fairly soon after that.

There is meaning in suffering. Not just God for the good times, when he feels close, when we feel loved, when we are doing well. God is in the darkness too, when we feel desolate and desperately lonely. A spiritual director told me that people often come in search of God for the first time in their lives because of some crisis, because of suffering in their lives. It draws them to their creator, to God, who gives life.

There **is** meaning in suffering. We have to rely on God fully because we are forced to accept our own weakness as human beings. The many years of intense suffering in my own life made me stronger, drew me closer to a powerful God of meaning and made me determined to seek out joy whenever I can find it.

At this time of year, there is a huge emphasis on “the joy of Christmas”. Often Christmas is the hardest time of the year for people who are alone, who have lost family members. But this joy is not the joy of family meals or presents under the tree. It is rejoicing in the absurd reality that the creator of the universe became a frail human being as we are, and has experienced all that we have experienced, including heartbreak and loneliness, and that he did this to buy our freedom, to give us eternal life.

If Christmas is for children, then it is Christmas for us as Children of God, growing in our relationship with our Creator, developing into the fullness of eternal life. As children, we do not understand fully the complexities of life around us. We do not completely understand the realities of a world complicated by sin and suffering, but we trust our Father, who offers us more love than we can imagine, and a full, abundant life with him.

We trust him to make glory out of our suffering, just as he did so many years ago when an exhausted young mother placed her child in a bed of straw.

That is the purpose of Christmas.