

Brother Luc

Voices from the Beginning

At Christmas time, Christians celebrate the manifestation of God in the birth of Jesus. God chooses what seems most insignificant in order to come into the world, to awaken the best in us, and to bring us to life in the most intimate part of our being by releasing compassion and the gift of self.

In the newborn Christ, the Creator makes himself human and gives himself for our contemplation, so that we may share in his joy and recognize the ways which he has chosen. Just as he invited in Mary and Joseph, so he makes each of us participants in his project. He counts on our welcome in order to liberate us from every hindrance and reveal the goodness that is in us.

To open up the fullness of the path of life, accessible even to the outcasts of society, Jesus would stay poor his whole life long. He would have no prestigious education, no official legitimacy, not even a place to lay his head. He comes as the servant of all. For us, he consecrates his entire life and dares to ask God for everything.

Today, God still chooses what is fragile in us and in the world to invite us to acknowledge him as the source of life, in the littlest ones as well as in our own hearts.

Christmas reminds us that love always includes a bit of night, where we live for the other person before we can see clearly enough to know them fully. Therefore, life carves itself a passage even through hardships and dead-ends. Following in the footsteps of Mary, the shepherds and the wise men, we can commit ourselves to this path. God has gone before us on it.

The texts of the Gospels show us a handful of believers of Israel around Mary and Joseph – Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna, and the shepherds.... As the tiny remnant awaiting salvation, rooting their lives in the faith of Abraham, Moses and the prophets, they recognized the Messiah in Jesus. Such also were the handful of disciples, living by the trust of Jesus, who were able to welcome the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. They grew in their faith to the point of contemplating the light, the glory of God on the face of Jesus. The former group express the widening of the faith of Israel into faith in Jesus Christ; the latter, the widening of faith in Christ into faith in the Holy Spirit present in them. The disciples followed and received the teaching of the master. The apostles became those sent who shared

the same responsibility and the same mission he did. They became the Body of Christ present in the world.

Gabriel, Angel of the Lord

This was one of my last missions. By my message, Mary welcomed the gift and the hope of God. I brought her the joy and the thanksgiving of Heaven, from which she bore the Saviour. She was about to conceive a son who would be the ultimate Word of God, the Word who sums up everything in one human existence. In Jesus, God came into the world and came to be with humanity. Soon the Word would spread by means of the disciples. They would make it echo through all languages, places and times.

Jesus lived in the hope of the Father and his entire life was a thanksgiving for the gift of God. On the cross, his flesh handed over and his blood poured out spoke more than all prophesies and all teachings about the free and irrevocable gift, in whom all find their origin and their fulfilment. Only his power is gentle enough to touch bruised or fearful hearts. He alone can heal and bring back to life those who have been caught in the nets of lies and evil.

This gift, which nothing has discouraged, emerged intact from the rubble of pride and cowardice. He awakened the hearts chilled by violence and reduced to silence. He invited them to recall a story and to recognize a Presence beyond the separation. The lightest Presence, and yet the most real. A promise of a possible

communion, even in the absence which now testifies to the gift.

In the place where it seemed violence had triumphed, where night had banished the Creator, where refusal alone was believed to occupy a desolate and voiceless solitude, this Word was heard and this gift welcomed so preciously by the Father. God announced Jesus, alive with him, and proclaimed in the light and in peace what he had said by the gift of his life. The death of the flesh became Word – eternal, definitive, and foundational. The Word guaranteed the whole and irrevocable gift, finding again its authentic face as a seal of the Absolute, an eternal anointing of our fragile and groping plans. Reconciled with life, death submitted the whole force of its irresistible embrace to serving the gift alone.

Just as water flowing down a river was once at the source of it, so this gift carries with it the Presence from which it comes and invites us to come and know that Presence deeply. Vibrantly full of self-giving hope, the Word takes from there its joyful momentum. The Word – so efficient a vehicle and guiding reference for the Presence! The Word carries the Presence on through every place and time, sowing it into new lands. And whoever welcomes it can awaken to the deepening knowledge of the Presence offering itself to them. From such an encounter flows joy and fullness of life.

Forgiveness and peace, proved once and for all genuine, have become seeds of a new life. They have thus begun their slow germination in human hearts, having healed them and liberated them from their fears, from their shame, and bringing to life in them boldness,

strength, determination, and resolve to give themselves in their turn.

Ever since this day when the doors holding the captive sinners were smashed to pieces, the same contemplation and the same worship of God has united the angels and humanity, the servants of God in heaven and on earth.

And so, let those who have ears hear!

Elizabeth

She arrived in silence. She had travelled the road from Nazareth through the mountains all alone. Nothing could have kept her from bringing this news; nothing could have managed to stifle her joy. She was going to give Christ to the world, the Christ who had set her on this path.

The child in me leapt for joy at the sound of Mary's greeting. Such a comfort from God in my old age, this child that I listen to with all my being recognized, even before seeing him, the One for whom he would prepare the way.

So God enlightened me and I cried out with gratitude! He, who has blessed me in my old age, has done something even greater in Mary. Look! She bore the Christ, and with her, he visited me!

To the most humble of women, without riches or diplomas, without position of power or backing, he entrusted himself. He believed that she could carry and serve his Son, the One who would bring about his

salvation for the world and the hope of generations of believers.

So young and without experience – what does she know about life? It is into this fresh new dough that God finds his dwelling place and grows. She did not refuse to open herself fully to the hope within her. Yes, the hope which hatches there the place of his Presence. She was able to welcome his Word and she lives from the extraordinary trust she has been shown. Free from all ambitions and dreams, she gives herself completely, without fear, without holding back, without measuring.

Zechariah and I had lived in longing for God's blessing, entrusting to him the mystery of our barrenness. He sustained our hope. Mary was already living in the fullness of the Presence to God and of the gift of herself. In the oh-so-hidden event of a human heart making itself available, the plans of God were coming to fulfilment and lighting up the face of humanity.

Her heart opened in song. She was celebrating God's faithfulness. Just like Moses and the Israelites after passing through the Red Sea, just like Anna the barren one, who became the mother of the prophet Samuel, just like King David before the Ark of the Covenant, Mary was singing to God who gives victory and gives life. She was proclaiming that the Word of God heard and welcomed by the heart is already a decisive event. It is there that the openness of faith springs up and freedom blooms, a field open to life. It is there that the battle is already won against enemies and obstacles. It is there that the harvest is assured even before the reaping. Her singing is the response to God's patient waiting. It will reverberate

from age to age to remind us all that God leads his project along in a most astonishing and unsuspected way.

Such good news for all the little ones who depend on his care! The humble and the poor who entrust themselves to him are more alive than the self-satisfied ones who think they have everything under control. It is all the little ones who are going to live by faith who are now the people chosen by God to carry out his will.

Blessed are those who believe that Jesus is the Word by which the Father proclaims and communicates himself fully. If you make yourself available to his Holy Spirit, if you live in his trust, you will already know victory and fruitfulness even before seeing the road.... There, where you are master of nothing, God will come and find his abode and fulfil, through you, his project of bringing forth Christ in the world. Loving your enemies (those who reject and abandon you), loving your neighbour each day, and loving even yourselves – all of this is beyond you. No one can do it by will-power alone. Only God loving in you can bring it about. But he cannot do it without you, without your "Yes," without your willingness, without your service.

The Shepherds

The inhabitants of Bethlehem will remember that night for a long time! How surprised they were to see our procession passing by! Those who lock their doors and go to bed early were awakened by our whistles and our songs. Of course, some of them complained and shouted at us,

but by and large, an attitude of amazement dominated. The shepherds celebrating in the streets!

Usually, we come down from the mountains only on work days and just to bring back our finished purchases right away. It is there where they find us, at the head of the pack leading the way, bringing up the rear on the way back, watching the work of the sheep dogs, guiding the uppity ones and encouraging the fussy ones. We are always at the service of these animals. We gather them, we care for them, we protect them, and we keep them far from the harvest fields in order to avoid disputes with the farmers. We speak to them more than we do to the merchants and villagers. Living out-of-the-way and not knowing how to read or write, with our unrefined clothes and our brevity of speech, we could often pass for primitive and uncultivated creatures. So then, what were we doing in town at that hour? Why this sort of wedding-like celebration? What was so important in our eyes to make us express ourselves in such a joyous way?

Yet we are the ones who have been marked forever by that night. In the retreat of our countryside, God manifested his glory to us. The Inaccessible One came to be with us, the Invisible One brought himself so near, just like for Moses and Elijah on the mountain! Through his messenger, he announced to us the coming of the Messiah. With him, God's plan for humanity was going to be realized and his hope fulfilled. The heavens opened and the angels leaned out to celebrate the Creator and Master of history coming to us in the newborn babe. God was inviting us to enter his Joy!

That news opened our hearts and we hastened to

recognize the announced sign. We found the infant asleep in the manger of a refuge for out-of-place visitors. Who would have been interested in the birth of the child of such a poor family? Nothing to admire, nothing great or mighty, nothing to receive or to learn. The Lord of our faith and of our fathers gives himself for our contemplation in the form of a little babe.

God is born! He became human among humans, mortal among mortals. A saviour in weakness, with neither words nor means. A king without a court, without a palace, without an army and yet already a shepherd in the service of his people. He had nothing to offer but he permitted each one to extend their arms to hold him, without fear or timidity... making the hearts of little ones like us overflow! We were not numerous at his crib but the infant Lord had united us in the same spirit, in the same peace, without words and all ready and willing.

Then we understood: God takes no other path but that of the love that he can bring to life in each human heart by making himself the littlest one. He does not know yet if he will be received, but he believes in our response. He doesn't want to accomplish anything alone, but hopes to make us co-workers with him.

The Saviour is already there; salvation is already on the way. He comes as a life at its beginning, vulnerable and full of promise. More time is needed for him to complete his mission, but if we welcome him today, his expectation will become a reality in us. How will this come to be? This first act sparks our curiosity. But we are not going to wait passively. The light and joy of heaven will lead us on and sustain us along the way....

God sent us to proclaim this joy, even to those who did not welcome the travelling strangers and the woman who was about to give birth. Our reserve had disappeared. He chose us, the lowest of society, to give us the first knowledge of the news. It was urgent to wake up the sleepers of Bethlehem.

So we buried our resentments and forgot former threats, humiliations, and old grudges. We went to the town. We called out to the people, sang the joy of the angels, and offered the peace of God. Nothing could stop us, they had to know it! That night we became God's messengers and shepherds to the inhabitants of Bethlehem.

The Wise Men

What a commotion we caused when we arrived in Jerusalem! It was not just our unusual cortege that was surprising, but also the news that we brought. "The King of the Jews is born and we have come from the East to pay him homage: help us to find him! We have crossed rivers, deserts and mountains to come and bow down before him. His star served as a sign for us. Captivated by its beauty, we looked for its origin. We did not just want to observe it from a distance; we wanted it to penetrate our lives. We left our books, our observations and our calculations. During our journey we asked questions to learned men, kings and priests...."

King Herod was taken by surprise and became worried about his power. He questioned the chief priests

and the teachers. They knew but they didn't want to know. They didn't accompany us. The king saw the birth of this saviour for the people as a threat! He was preoccupied by the fear of losing his authority; moreover, his specialists, spies and soldiers reinforced his fears. How lonely it is inside a prison of anguish!

At the end of our journey the star led us toward the newborn babe in Bethlehem.

We offered him our gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

He came without a temple in which to celebrate and without anything to offer as a sacrifice. He was entirely a gift from God, a gift offered and received. He is Emmanuel, God with us.

He is a good shepherd at the service of his people. His life given awakens the best in us and opens our hearts. He makes us fully alive. By being called by him, we become the best of ourselves.

He can live only if we welcome him into our lives, if we help him and serve him. Everyone will agree to bend their knee before his authority which comes not from power or superiority, and is the only one which is fruitful. This king cannot take or command anything, but he can open a spring of living water in human hearts.... All will lay down their arms before him. They will leave their fears and timidity behind. Everyone will want to give him their most beautiful works.

He is mortal. In the finitude of human flesh God finds a dwelling! The limits of the flesh can welcome the unlimited God. He has not yet spoken and yet he has told us everything about God. Because it is not through

words that God makes himself known. He chooses to make himself known through the gift of a life. This contradiction that burns within our spirit keeps us from the arrogance of thinking we have understood but, in faith, keeps open the source of life. This feeble light, so tiny that the smallest image can cover it, but which spreads like the sun in the morning, tells us that day wins out over night.

As we came to meet him, we walked before the seekers of light. On our way home, we walked before those who brought the Good News which was destined to spread as far as the ends of the earth.

If, like us, you are searching with perseverance for the light of life, you will find beneath your doubts and fears, in the night and the silence of your heart, a yearning, as feeble as it may seem on the road. Like a star, it can lead you forward to turn your life into a gift. From this gift springs forth life. A path begins here. Christ, God made man, opened the way.

Herod

What if these visitors from the East were speaking the truth? A king born in Israel? I went and consulted my scribes; they confirmed that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. How did these strangers learn this news? How had it travelled so far when we ourselves did not even know it?

If a Saviour was born, wouldn't I have been the first to have known? In addition, we were expecting a

Messiah coming from heaven with power and majesty, not dressed in swaddling-clothes, in a provincial town! How could a new king come when I was ordained by God to sit on David's throne? How could there be two kings? Would God want to divide his people?

How could a child rule over a nation? Only after a long time of being involved in plots and ruses can anyone exercise power. You cannot wield power and keep your hands clean. How could weakness exercise authority? No matter what the cost, you have to be ready to keep your control over the passions of a people, which are always ready to flame up. An iron fist is necessary to rule a difficult nation. How could one of the poor ascend to the throne? One must calm so many appetites, pay the spies a high price, and put to sleep the members of the court. One must please one's supporters on all sides.

These strangers can believe whatever they want, but it is better to hush the matter up to make sure that they will have no followers. I will not let myself be impressed by their story or let them stir up trouble among my people. It is better to end all the hope that they might have created and stop them in this madness, which could trigger an even greater danger. To eliminate all ambiguity, to remove any doubts from the mind of the people, let us quickly do away with those who would foster such perilous illusions... Some newborn children may well have to disappear to ensure the safety of all. That will avoid trouble and oppositions which would weaken the royal authority. And the bloodshed will soon be forgotten.

Joseph

We left hastily, in the middle of the night, because of the madness of the king, who had ordained that all the newborns should be killed. What kind of deceit could have disturbed his afflicted mind so that he would be so afraid of little children? Did he not have other more serious problems to occupy his mind: dishonest members of the court and ambitious conspirators?

In the dead of winter, the emperor of Rome had set out on the road the entire population in a feverish agitation. He wants to count his subjects to evaluate his power. With his laws, his registries, his army, his administration, his taxes, he thinks that he controls the world! However, life does not pass through the avenues of power but through the hidden and elusive pathways of peaceful hearts and the humble gift of self.

I had to take Mary with me in the cold. We were walking for days, travelling as fast as she could manage. Upon arriving in Bethlehem, I was relieved that all the chaos and worries of our travels were over. But what a disappointment! In the land of my ancestors, no one would welcome us. No one would open their door to us to offer their home to exhausted travellers and welcome them under their roof. Even to a woman who is about to give birth. We ended up with the animals in the stable.

Mary did not seem to see the closing doors, the darting eyes, the mockery, and the refusals. She was untouched by them; they didn't affect her; they didn't distract her. She remained entirely focused on the little child that was on the way. Since the beginning, she was

concerned to offer him all the attention and the peace of her heart by entrusting him to God at every moment.

The birth went well. After a few weeks of rest we could have returned to Nazareth.... God warned us and saved us from a terrible misfortune. And now we are heading towards an even bigger unknown. We were chased away from the land given to our ancestors in compensation for the enslavement of our people in Egypt. We are now refugees, uprooted from one place and the next, like dust in the wind of history, without any say in our destiny. But Egypt is also the land of Joseph who saved his brothers from famine and forgave their offence. It is the homeland of Moses, chosen by God to lead his people towards freedom. What will happen there?

What is God going to do? How can he manage if, from the very beginning, he has been refused and rejected? If there is not even a place for a newborn child, how could there be a place for the Saviour? Can God possibly bring his salvation through so many refusals? How can he put up with these people who are turning away from him? How can he be so patient? If I try to understand, I am lost; anger and discouragement take hold of me. These questions are those of a distant bystander. I cannot go away; I am called to remain. God entrusted me to take care of Mary and Jesus; when I look at them, I can't spend another second hesitating; I am all they have.

They pull me away from my thoughts and confusion. They remind me that there is no need to know everything in order to serve God's will. Tonight, a story, unheard of and never imagined, is taking shape. Who

else could tell it other than God himself? He wants to write it through us. We get to live this story! It has been overwhelming since the beginning but still, I can help Mary: leading our donkey, looking for wood, bringing light, preparing straw to sleep on. One thing after another and then everything is ready.

Zechariah

Herod had my son killed in his fortress on the whim of his mistress. In truth, did not they want to silence the truth that he was proclaiming, even though he was already silent in his jail cell? His imprisonment only gave more authority to his argument. His blood, now shed, seals the fact that his whole life was consecrated to God.

His arrest had left a void. The calls to conversion and the masses of pilgrims who flocked from all over the country to be baptized in the Jordan came to an end. What was going to become of the hope that he had inspired by proclaiming the coming of the Messiah?

His mother and I had been sustained by that hope since his birth. Despite the fact that I am a priest and the son of a priest, except for the service of God, I was far from him. Old and childless, our barrenness was an open wound. What was the point of our existence if we were not bearing fruit? Were the sacrifices that I offered to God valid if deep inside me I was ignorant of his will? Could I pass on his blessing if I didn't even know it myself? This was added to all my other inner

questioning. The failures and the shortcomings of our people, the pride and sins of our leaders weighed upon us. Could this vine planted by God still bear fruit? We were divided; we had forgotten his call and his plan for us. Did God still have expectations for us? Did our service still have any meaning, or was it too late?

But then, faithful to his promise, He intervened and freed us from these burdens. He changed our mourning into dancing. He renewed for us the gift made to Abraham and Sarah in their old age. For myself, I didn't believe that he could choose my poverty! But he did not leave me in the dark. Now I know the fruitfulness of his word. He triumphed, despite my inability to believe. I can sing his praise, not out of duty, but out of gratitude.

This is why our son is called John. His name proclaimed that "God loves freely and unconditionally". His birth freed me from my mute torpor and my tongue sang of God's goodness towards us. We consecrated the child to him. We did not have any ambition other than letting him develop as he was: fruit of God's mercy on the barren vine of our discouragement. If God can make fruitful the arid soil, how much more can he make fruitful the fertile soil of a humble and contrite heart? God chose our child as a special servant to prepare his people for the coming of the Messiah.

For us, John was the presence of God's goodness. He reminded us at every moment that God can accomplish his will despite all the obstacles. Through his forgiveness, love is given without condition, given again despite our refusal, our pride, and our blindness.

His life for God, his service to the poor in faith

touched the hearts of the people and prepared the coming of the Messiah. For the multitudes, he became the Baptist. He proclaimed to all the end of their despair, their exile, their lost lives and their failures. He helped them to welcome their salvation by calling them unceasingly to turn to the Light that is to come. He was entirely turned towards the One who is to come, focusing the longings of the people and turning them into a white-hot flame.

He fulfilled his mission; he was faithful to God more than to human beings; he prepared the way for the Lamb of God. He introduced the one who lived the hope of God for his people, the one who was completely available to God so that God could be present in this world. He sent his own disciples to him; he was moving towards him; he was preparing his way.

The Baptist ended up like many other prophets. But hadn't he announced it himself when he pointed to the Lamb of God? "He must grow greater and I must grow less." His life given to the very end manifested the gift of God even to the wicked.

How would the Lamb of God grow in light of such high expectations? How would he reach those who did not come to the Jordan? How would he extend salvation even to Jerusalem, to those whom fear had convinced that it is better to deny the voice of truth, to destroy the light in order to conceal their complicity with evil? The star from on high brings salvation to all. I only see this in faith, but joy comes with faith. God, who gave me a son in my old age, who gave his Spirit to John, who made him more than a prophet and allowed him to

bear witness by his blood, is going to surprise us again and enable the Lamb of God to reveal him even more. Isn't he the perfect offering that God provides to enter into communion with humankind? He comes from the heart of God himself; he knows that the time has come and already lives the passion of God for human beings.

In my very old age, I can only sing again and again my gratefulness for the works of God in my life and for his people and rejoice in what God is going to accomplish through the Lamb of God.

Mary

They opened the doors! They went out to meet the inhabitants of Jerusalem. They invited them and shared what they received from the Risen Lord. Those who said they were our enemies are now welcomed as brothers and sisters. On the cross, Jesus destroyed the wall of hatred and His disciples are now continuing along his path.

It is not a team of heroes or of geniuses. They are no longer the group of idealists who followed Jesus on the road to Galilee, ready to fight with the authorities, aspiring to succeed. They were scattered and confronted with their denial. Their dreams vanished but so did their fears. In this new day, they are free.

Each one is not following his own way any longer, but all can now live for the others. They burn with the same fire that consumed Jesus; they are all dedicated to the same task. Their faith has awoken; the gift of God

is welcomed; life blossoms plentifully for all; and the Holy Spirit extends his domain on the earth! As diverse as they are, enlivened by the Spirit of the risen Christ, they become his visible presence here and now.

They now know from experience that it is not great deeds, extensive knowledge or brilliant speeches that can open the road to life, but the love which is stronger than death. Remaining faithful together, with one heart, becomes a witness so that others can believe and so that even the weakest can find strength. They understood that being faithful to Jesus led them towards those whom they once feared and despised.

And so it is given to me to live a new fruitfulness: to see a new fruit of faith come into the world – this communion between people that comes from the communion between Jesus and His Father.

No book, no instruction can teach you how to be a mother. It is always from our inexperience, from times when we do not know and we feel overwhelmed, that our capacity to give is awakened. Do we ever know the gift of self? If it is complete availability to another, you cannot measure or verify it. For us, it seems dark, although it is a moment of maximum intensity in our life. The one who aspires to life wants nothing else and nothing less.

By inviting me to follow Abraham and the believers of Israel, by giving me obedience to his Word, God opened a way for the coming of his only Son into the world and made me bold enough to welcome him.

From Cana to Golgotha, with the disciples, the presence of Jesus allowed the seed of the kingdom to grow

within us. He made us know the deep longing with which God welcomes each one of us, as well as the entire gift that he has destined for us. Keeping the word of the Son and putting it into practice means being kept alive by the Father who finds his joy in us and waits for us to respond. Discovering that we are children of the same Father bound me to Jesus with even more intensity than ties of blood.

I put into practice every one of his words; I welcomed my son's beloved disciple; I believed in him just as I had believed in Jesus. I followed him; I stayed in Jerusalem, becoming one heart with his disciples, turned towards God, until they received the promised Holy Spirit. Today, they are born from above and the community founded on forgiveness and peace – the seed of unity beyond all borders, the hope for every human being – is coming into the world.

At each stage, God was asking me to believe with him in his hope, in the power of his mercy and compassion! He was asking me to believe that people could be free from evil, from selfishness, from fears which engulf and isolate us.... The child conceived in me was entirely his gift. My humility and my lowliness opened vast expanses for him. The weakness of a newborn was not an obstacle that kept him from giving himself entirely and awakening our hearts. The weakness of Jesus on the cross did not make him less available for God to be present and to manifest his glory. The weakness of the disciples and of those he loves will not be a greater obstacle to the deployment of His Spirit.

At each step, his Word widened the longing and the

silence within me and cleared a space where he could remain. We are treasure-chests of this openness that has no name and no face, but is the source through which life comes. It is up to us not to try and fill it or to run away from it, but to keep the promise of God's coming into the world here and now. Healing, serving, contemplating the unobservable growth of his work, and letting him forge his path for us allows us to be born from above, to be born in Heaven and to enable him to come into world. He comes into the world first of all by only being born in us, in the cry of a newborn, in the last breath of a dying man, or in the fragility of those who persevere to be one heart in his Spirit in order to be his Body in the human family. He lowers himself so to entrust everything to humanity, to expect everything from humanity, and to believe everything from humanity.

Believing that we can welcome him, give birth to him, and offer him to men: this is the great deed the Lord accomplished for me! It nourishes my praise and that of generations to come.

Translated from the French by Amanda Simon, Madison Hagen, Louise Bernstein et Elise Limonier

© Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, 71250 Taizé, France
DL 1156 — juillet 2012 — ISSN: 2101-731X — ISBN: 9782850403392
Achévé d'imprimer en août 2012 — Bureautique 71, 71000 Mâcon