



He came all so still

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Contemplating the Nativity, for St Ignatius, is not just a cerebral exercise; engaging with the mystery of the Incarnation requires all of our senses. Teresa White FCJ considers how our meeting with the gentle Christ child can effect a powerful transformation in us if we are alive to the many ways in which we can receive the gift of his coming.

Ignatius of Loyola, at the beginning of the Second Week of his Spiritual Exercises, encourages the practice of what he calls 'the application of the senses'. Ignatius takes the Nativity as a model for his method of imaginative contemplation. The retreatant is encouraged, after a consideration of the mystery, to set the scene and to enter imaginatively into it, to be fully present there in order to 'see' what is happening: the circumstances, the persons, the actions. Ignatius then suggests listening to the voices and sounds, smelling and tasting the 'infinite fragrance and sweetness' of the divinity. Finally, there is an invitation to apply the sense of touch, 'by embracing or kissing the place where the persons stand or are seated' (*Spiritual Exercises*, §122 – 125).

The grace of this part of the retreat is gentleness. To enter into communion with the living God in this way makes us gentle. Ignatius is not the only one to have thought so. Prayer is genuine, wrote Friedrich von Hügel in a letter to his niece, 'if in coming away from it, you find yourself humbler, sweeter, more patient'. There is also a traditional French carol, *Quelle est cette odeur agréable?*, which is a hymn to gentleness, to the universal peace (*la paix universelle*) that is the message of the angel who announces the birth of the saviour. The carol portrays the birth of Jesus Christ as a feast for the senses. The shepherds are drawn to the stable by a delightful fragrance (*cette odeur agréable*), by the radiant light of the star of morning (*l'astre du jour ...*



si radieux) and by wonderful music filling the air with such 'concerts' as have never been heard before. A line from Psalm 34, 'Oh taste and see that the Lord is good' (verse 8), similarly expresses an encounter with the divine through the sense of taste, and that experience is one of many other marvels (*beaucoup d'autres merveilles*) referred to in the carol. The sense of touch has its place too, at least metaphorically, for the shepherds seeing

the newborn child are deeply moved. As if their hearts have indeed been touched by the finger of God, they feel compelled to bow down in adoration before this little child, recognising him as their Redeemer (*que rien ne vous empêche d'adorer votre Rédempteur*). The whole carol joyfully reminds us that gentleness, the gentleness of God, is conveyed, communicated, through the senses. The Word of God was made flesh in Jesus, who lived among us, and his gentle presence was tangible, visible, audible...

When the senses are engaged and the imagination captured, authentic emotional insights are received, without which there will be little spiritual growth or change in behaviour and attitudes. In the spiritual life, therefore, using the [imagination](#) in prayer is important: it leads the retreatant towards a vision of the universe in which God's presence is experienced in different aspects of our lives. A fleeting glance, a passing scent, an evocative sound, a delicious flavour, a soothing caress – expressions of gentleness such as

those of which the hymn sings do not represent a continual state of being. Gentleness is a gift freely given, but we do not and cannot possess it definitively; we receive its benefits, it changes us, then it leaves us. We can, however, pass on the gift to others, share it with them, and very often we do this non-verbally. The expression in our eyes, a gesture, a smile, a tear, a gift, a touch – any or all of these can convey gentleness. Wherever there is tenderness and kindness, there is gentleness. Its benefits overflow into the physical, bringing a sense of well-being and joy to the whole body.

We are all familiar with St Paul's list of the qualities of love (1 Corinthians 13: 4-8): love is patient, kind, not jealous, not boastful or conceited, rejoices in the truth... Gentleness, like all the virtues, is rooted in love, but it has its own appropriate epithets. It is conciliatory, delicate, sensitive, calm, compassionate, courteous, non-judgemental. Gentleness is allied to companionship, which means opening up to creation and to our common humanity.

As we become more receptive to God's presence in our lives, we are led to a deeper awareness of the divine radiating in all our relationships. If our gaze, the way we look at people, is friendly, approving, welcoming, it will communicate gentleness. When we touch people and things respectfully – if we tread softly upon the earth which is [our common home](#) – our touch, our footfall, our caress will be gentle. Tasting food and drink gratefully and appreciatively, and remembering with sadness those who do not have sufficient food, also leads to gentleness. When we take time to listen to the sounds which are a part

of our lives, to the music of the universe, to the voices of those who love us and those who dislike us; when we remember that God does not shout, that we need some degree of silence to hear his voice, these things too will increase gentleness in us. Inhaling the scents and odours that surround us, and relishing the flavours of our food and drink, all this slows us down, makes us approach life more gently, more reflectively. Above all, it is through gentleness that we learn 'to open the door of the heart to all the seasons of human life, to share partings and homecomings, to touch the springs of hope and let them overflow into another human heart' (P. Byrne CSsR).

'Gently does it' is a phrase we have all used at some time or another, if only because experience has taught us that it amounts almost to a law of nature that the gentle way is the best – whether we are talking about DIY, trade union negotiations or getting on with the neighbours... Certainly, it was God's way with us in the Incarnation. 'He came al so stille to where his moder lay', says the medieval carol – and from the earliest years Christian artists, poets and musicians, have presented the Nativity as a scene of stillness and gentle wonder. And in the 21st century surely nothing has essentially changed, despite the commercialism of today's festive season. The Christ child comes as gently into our hearts as ever, if we are waiting, because he can come in no other way.

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