

In another parish, about ten years ago the doorbell rang. When I answered it, there was a man and a woman there whom I knew, instantly, were completely certain that their religious beliefs were right; so right, in fact, that they wanted to share them with me. Please God I would never consciously denigrate anyone's faith, but the Anglican writer Harry Williams once said: "Absolute certainty belongs only to the insane." And I think he's probably right. Very recently, Pope Francis said the same thing. He said: "If one has the answers to all the questions, that is the proof that God is not with him. It means that he is a false prophet using religion for himself. The great leaders of the people of God, like Moses, have always left room for doubt. You must leave room for the Lord, not for our certainties; we must be humble."

The man asked me what I thought about Christmas, because his community did not celebrate it in any way. I told him I was a Catholic priest, and that I celebrated Christmas in more-or-less the same way as most other Christians do. He then asked me whether I realised that nobody actually knows when Jesus was born: I said yes, I

did realise that. He further asked whether I was aware that the early Church had fixed December 25th as Christ's birthday because it coincided with the pagan celebration of the winter solstice, so that the transition was made easier for pagans who converted to Christianity; again, I said yes, I was aware of it. Then he said: "How do you think God feels about that, celebrating Jesus' birth on a pagan feast?" I told him that since I had no way of knowing how God felt about it, it wasn't a problem for me. I didn't elaborate, because I think the *symbolic* idea of the divine light being born into the world at its darkest time, and *spiritual* idea of the Word eternally being born in the human heart, and the *mythological* idea of a ceaselessly descending, dying and rising god, would all have probably been beyond his interest and definitely beyond his approval. Everything for him was concrete and literal and he simply knew that rightness and reason and the scriptural insights of the founder of his faith, were on his side.

In the same way, people have quite often been absolutely certain about what the baptism of Jesus means; after all, Jesus didn't actually need to be baptized. Some

say that by submitting to baptism himself, Jesus instituted the sacrament of baptism for the Church; others say that the baptism of Jesus marks the moment when he became fully aware for the first time that he was the Son of God; others, that he allowed himself to be baptized so that the scriptures would be perfectly fulfilled; and there are others again who say that Jesus was confirming his Jewish rabbinic allegiance, because Jewish male converts were initiated through circumcision, baptism and sacrifice. Perhaps they're all true, at least partially. For me, it doesn't actually matter; the image of Jesus descending into the waters and rising out of them again, and the voice of God calling him 'Beloved' is of sufficient poetic beauty in itself – artists from the early centuries onwards have thought so too. I find the symbolism of the event rich and deep enough on its own. For me, a 'correct' theological explanation is unnecessary. I don't think there actually *is* a correct theological explanation. Does this matter? No. Is it an obstacle to belief? On the contrary – it enables belief and gives it beauty.

In the late 19th century, Cardinal Henry Manning, Archbishop of Westminster, referring to infallibly declared doctrine, spoke of ‘the beauty of inflexibility’; to me, this idea is hideous – inflexibility has no beauty at all, only the ugliness of unyielding authority. Inflexibility means utter certainty and utter certainty leaves no room for faith; it has no imagination, no creativity, there can be no spiritual blossoming. In Henry James’ novel *Washington Square*, Catherine Sloper begs her father for permission to marry Morris Townsend – a penniless chancer whom the father knows is only after her money. He refuses time and again. Finally, pleading with him, Catherine cries out to her father: “Will you not relent?” And her father replies: “Shall a geometrical proposition relent?”

That kind of total inflexibility has no place in theology or spirituality or the Christian life. It makes faith impossible. The head cannot know with any kind of certainty at all *why* Jesus submitted himself to baptism, or what its true meaning is, but this doesn’t actually matter. Because the head doesn’t *need* to know – enough that the heart sees the beauty of it and nourishes itself on that.