

If Christ came into our world to redeem it, why doesn't our world look more redeemed? Why a pandemic, why is our world still full of loneliness, betrayals, sickness, poverty, violence, war, and death? What did Christ's coming into our world really change?

These aren't irreverent questions – they're the right questions. Only in struggling to answer them do we begin to understand more deeply the mystery of Christ. But what IS that mystery?

It's there in the Christmas story. When the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, the message delivered was "The virgin shall be with child and give birth to a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel, a name which means 'God is with us.'" (see Mt 1:20-22) So what do these words mean?

Sometimes it's helpful to proceed by the *via negativa*, namely, by explaining what something does NOT mean. In this case, the fact that Christ is born into our world does not mean that those who believe in Him will be spared pain, loneliness, illness, heartache, betrayal poverty, fear, and the humiliations that afflict everyone else. Faith offers no one an escape from the realities of life. Moreover, believers, just like unbelievers, will suffer the darkness of doubt, the fear that we are poor misguided folks to believe. Faith in Christ does not remove any of the pains inherent within the human condition, including the pain of doubting the very existence of God. Faith promises no magic pass-cards.

What faith does promise is that God will be with us so that we do not have to walk through all of this alone. We have a hand to grasp, a love to embrace, a truth to cling to, and a power to sustain us – even through death itself. We walk in the same world as everyone else, but, like a young child holding on to his mother's hand as he walks into the first day of kindergarten, we are not alone. A trusted, sustaining, guiding love walks with us. God does not remove us from what can hurt us, but walks with us through it all.

But some days this explanation can feel pretty empty. If God is walking beside us through Covid-19, hand in ours, why don't we feel that more readily? Why does God often seem non-existent, non-responsive, not with us at all?

Because believers, like everyone else, are not exempt from the trials of life, of faith, of doubt, from those emotional and spiritual dark nights that can crush us, bring us to our knees, and can make us cry out in fear that God has abandoned us, as happened to Jesus on the cross. Part of being human is the experience of God's seeming absence. Faith does not remove us from reality.

So how can we say that 'God is with us' when mostly it feels like God ISN'T there for us? That's a complex question and a full answer would necessitate a discussion on why, in the nature of faith, God's reality is often felt more like an absence than a presence. But, without entering into a full-blown discussion on this, allow me to give just one perspective.

In the Book of Exodus, there's a famous incident where Moses asks God to see God's face. God answers that this is impossible because nobody can see God's face and live. When Moses persists in his demand, God offers a compromise: He tells Moses that He will place him in a cleft in the rocks, put His hand over Moses' face, and then pass by, so that Moses will get to see God's back, though never His face. (see Exodus 33)

What's the meaning of this? Among other things, that we are wise not to be overly naïve about the powerful, sacred, archetypal energies that flow through us. Even when something is beautiful and good, like sex for instance, it doesn't mean we don't have to treat it with sacred caution. We're wise to accord things their proper respect, to keep our shoes off before the burning bush.

But there's a wonderful sub-text here too which can help explain why we so often think that God is absent in our lives. Generally, we struggle to feel God in the present moment, to see God's face in the here and now, in this pandemic. In the present moment, God often seems absent. Yet, when we turn around and look back upon our lives, when we look back upon our story, we more easily see how God has been there all along and how we have walked in a divine presence, protection, guidance, and love that were imperceptible at the time but are clear in retrospect. We see God more clearly in our past than in our present. We see God's back more than we see God's face. This truth is expressed in the phrase "Life is lived forward but understood backward." We see God's back.

This can be helpful in understanding how Christ is present to us, even when it doesn't always feel like it.

Faith does not promise us a ladder to crawl out of the pains of life, it promises someone to walk with through those pains. Mostly though, it's only when we look back upon our lives that we see that this Divine Friend has always been there. Always. Amen. (this is adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, posting of 19 December 2004)