A conversation overheard at the nativity crib in Trafalgar Square (designed by Tomoaki Suzuki) in the pouring rain the other evening: In the background carol singers bravely battling it out against the elements under the Norwegian Christmas tree with umbrellas, and here at the crib two small children, peering in, faces squashed up against the glass. Inside, the nativity scene is lit, warm, cozy and inviting. There is stillness and peace. Each of the characters in their own space, placed apart, but together telling us the story we each know. In the centre the baby Jesus, with Joseph lying down on his side, protectively watching the child. Mary kneeling, gazing at Jesus too, an angel hovers above. A wise man, arm outstretched, points to the sky; a shepherd, a donkey, a sheep.

A small boy, used perhaps to too many Christmas scenes that are all-singing all-dancing merry-go-rounds, with Father Christmas in his grotto and elves in snow houses, and sacks of presents, asks ‘why isn’t it moving?’ In the middle of the bustling heart of this city, in contrast this scene is still, it is spacious and simple. A little girl also makes her own assessment of the scene, looking at Mary and the angel - innocently cutting through the meaning of it all to ask the question that is crucial to her - ‘Why are there only two girls and lots of boys?’

On Sunday evening we screened the artwork NATIVITY\(^1\) by Martha Fiennes. It is a beautiful contemporary moving film image of the nativity. It’s like a painting that is constantly evolving and developing. Filmed with real actors, the makers say that if you watched it continually for three months you wouldn’t see the same configuration of images and background, light, combination of characters and movement twice. Like the crib in the Square it also had a stillness to it – like a tableau or still life – but it is constantly changing. Backgrounds shift, a dilapidated shop front, that could represent a modern day stable in the Middle East today, becomes an architectural ruin and then a church. Darkness behind becomes a town at night with lights – is it Bethlehem, or London or Damascus? Shepherds gather together wearily on the floor to one side. At the centre the figure of Mary, sometimes waiting for her baby to be placed into her arms, as other characters rock and cuddle it - sometimes she is herself caught up in holding this small child.

For a while the only change we see, if we look carefully, is the movement of the gentle rise and fall of this tiny child’s form, breathing in its mother’s arms. It is the centre of this image. Sometimes it is the only thing that is moving; still, simple, breathing and full of life.

That simple breathing of a child is the centre of this Christmas Day. God with us, come to be with us in the breath of a child. ‘Come like child’, as Rowan Williams describes in his Advent poem. God simply breathing with us – the same air; bringing us movement and life; a life that will breathe into and transform the whole world.

Like the children commenting at the crib, we are invited to find the movement that brings the story of a child born so long ago, alive for us, moving and breathing in our own arms. A couple on the move because of state regulations, a birth in an out-of-the-way place, in poverty, outsiders the first to be invited in. Fear, amazement, wonder, delight. A mother pondering things in her heart. A

\(^{1}\) [http://www.sloimage.co.uk/nativity/](http://www.sloimage.co.uk/nativity/)
story that is political and social and personal. We know the story but where is God breathing it with us, in this city, in our world, in our own lives?

We might say there doesn’t seem to be any movement. Where is the breath of God in our world when we see so much around us that causes us such pain? Unresolved, senseless violence that we do to one another; injustice that leaves people living with an oppressive regime and the devastation of a civil war; inequality and cuts to services and benefits that mean that more people are living in poverty in this country; the results of our modern day census that shows people in the UK falling away from the Christian faith, or not choosing it as their default position; a church that says only boys can be bishops. I wonder what the small girl at the crib would say to that? Where is the story alive and moving? Where is the life and breath?

The life is there in all those experiences. In this tiny baby, God comes to be with us in those human experiences of injustice and need and poverty and violence and indifference and discrimination, because that is the same life that Jesus led. He is there with us in it.

The breath of this baby is the same breath that will call his disciples, speak words of healing and wisdom, and defiant anger against the injustices and powers of his day, will tell stories that will open his hearers hearts and lives to God, will pray ‘Abba, Father’, fall silent before Pilate, and cry out to his father as he takes his last breath of life on the cross. Jesus brings us life because he is the life we live and breathe too. There is nothing to separate us from his love, only the things we might put in the way.

So what might it mean to allow him to breathe in us? Allow him to be born in our lives anew this Christmas? One of the lines that has stayed with me through recent days, of anticipation and waiting and preparing and the marathon of carols and services that is St Martin’s in December is from The Manchester Carols, written by the Poet Laureate Carol Ann Duffy. They are words of the angel to Mary, ‘Heaven on earth resides in you. You bear the Christmas child’. Can we imagine our lives being a place where heaven on earth is alive and lives? Can we allow ourselves to experience that joy?

Jean Vanier, the founder of the L’Arche communities, says ‘We are called to let Jesus love and live inside us. ‘The secret things of God are hidden’. The great secret is that in this world of pain and division, he comes and wants to reveal himself to us. He wants to say to us, ‘I wish to rest in you.’ This is a beautiful secret.’

God is with us in stillness and simplicity, in the quiet preparation and imperceptible movement of a baby growing in the womb. We don’t always see it or perceive it but his breath is there. And we are invited to be a place where that life can live and grow and flourish. An incredible life of hope and joy, of love for all people, of freedom and peace. We long for this transforming love in our world. We can be the place where it begins.

Today, we know that in God’s incredible generosity and love, it is possible. He is Emmanuel, God with us, breathing in and through us.

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2 Jean Vanier, *Treasures of the Heart*