

## What I want for Christmas is ...

The two high seasons of the Christian year – Advent leading to Christmas, and Lent leading to Easter – inevitably are the touchstones of faith for many of us. It's at these seasons we (re)discover how we really see the Jesus-story, and what we believe about God and God's relationship with humankind and creation. That's all as it should be. These seasons are meant for contemplation and consideration of the deep meanings we hold in the mental and spiritual package we call "faith".

This particular Advent of 2013 has found me more consciously and more critically looking inside and asking questions of myself (again) about the substance, direction, grounding and vision that are part of my own faith. Not surprisingly, I've had to dust off some cobwebs that have accumulated there over the last while. In that inner home of my faith, just like any home I suppose, these cobwebs manage to gather unseen for a time. It's only when I make the effort to look closely into some of those inner corners, too often ignored, that I discover how much these dusty, unsightly, and unwanted bits and pieces are dimming and masking any brightness or fullness of faith underneath.

So what have I seen that needs clearing out, in this latest foray inside my mind and spirit?

I've discovered distressingly broad, and discomfortingly long-standing cobwebs of intolerance – for those whose views of the world differ from mine, those who are spiritually fed and uplifted in ways that are not my ways, those who do not willingly embrace something close to my version of Christianity. How did this happen, I ask? When did I decide that I had the understanding, wisdom or even the right, to name my faith somehow more worthy or true than the faith of anyone else? How is it that I speak passionately about acceptance and openness to others' ways, while I've let huge webs of closed-mindedness and self-righteousness adorn the surfaces of my faith?

I've seen subtle, cleverly disguised cobwebs of despondency and even fear – at what life may hold in store personally for me, at what feels like a precariously-thin meaning and substance for that life, at the future well-being of people and groups and places about which I care, at the future for the church itself as a spiritual home for faith-filled and faith-seeking people – my spiritual home. How, I ask, is hope to actually shine and lead the way for me through such a clouded covering? Under what dusty blanket might I find the passion and the courage that I felt sure were in there earlier? How can I truly hear and grasp once more words of hope and possibilities and trust, especially when they're my own words?

Finally, in some of the deep corners of my spirit I've seen ponderous swooping cobwebs of indifference and self-centredness. Where is the caring and compassion under all that? Well, I rationalize, with the world's pain and brokenness so clearly seen in so many ways, these webs may actually be a shield to keep me from being overwhelmed by it all. Perhaps, I reply, but isn't it awfully easy, then, to slip into not caring about much of anything, under that cover of self-protection? To what degree am I letting myself off the hook for caring as my faith calls me to care – and then actually doing something about that caring?

Ouch! These are tough discoveries. What do I do with them?

I can let them wrap me in self-deprecation and self-doubt – that's seductively easy. But that would only perpetuate them and let them grow even more well-entrenched within me. Or I can see them for what they are – signs or my own human imperfections and limitations, natural responses to the ups and downs of life in all its complexity and thousands of shades of grey (way more than 50!), self-defenses that have built up over time to become dusty and troublesome masks and blankets on my soul. With some direct effort, with some intentional spirit-work that might involve prayer, and long walks, and reading, and conversations with people I trust, I can do some inner house-cleaning that I suspect many of us might need to do. I'm also pretty sure it's like most house-cleaning, that needs to be done again and again. Those cobwebs just keep on building up.

So what do I want for Christmas? I'd really like a gift of courage and willpower to get in there and really clean things up a little. I may not get it all done at once, but I'd like to at least get started. I suspect it's one of those jobs that I'll find isn't so difficult – once I actually get started.

Blessings for your own Advent journey, and for a touch of holiness to sparkle into view at Christmas.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, consisting of a large, stylized letter 'B' followed by a smaller, less distinct mark that could be 'M' or 'M.'. The signature is written in a cursive, fluid style.