

And Can This Newborn Mystery?

Brian Wren
Chilmark, Maine

And can this newborn mystery,
an infant learning how to feed,
defeat the grim and chilling powers
of domination, death, and sin?

The One whose tiny hands and eyes
suspend our breath and tug our heart
awakens some to joyful praise
while others whisper, "Is it true?"

For sin infects, deceives, ensnares,
and domination towers and gleams,
and death, dispatched to foreign lands,
will turn again, and find us all.

This child, full-grown, shall shine with love
for outcast, righteous, rich and poor,
withstand the powers with healing words
and then be crushed, betrayed, destroyed.

And some will feel the Spirit's power
and some will doubt, or cling to faith
and some will hope but never know,
and some will joyfully believe.

And so, with doubt, or hope reborn,
or anxious certainty, or peace,
we worship, trust, and rise to serve
an infant learning how to feed.

Tunes: Try "Dickinson College" or "Gonfalon Royal"

Poetic Meter: 8.8.8.8. (Long Meter)

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Notes on the Hymn – For Preachers, Teachers and Others

This Newborn Mystery

If you enjoyed reading the Harry Potter series, will you read some of the books again and again? Or will you find that once you've got to the end and found out what happened, you have less interest in revisiting it, except perhaps to enjoy J. K. Rowling's inventive imagination with magical characters (Hagrid, Thestrals, Dementors, Death Eaters, Dumbledore, Snape et al) and names such as Kreacher the house elf (so much more interesting than "creature"), Malfoy (bad faith), and Voldemort (flight of death)? Is it basically a terrific tale whose secret ceases to be compelling once you know it? Or is there an element of mystery that enriches you each time you approach it? The hymn celebrates the mystery of Jesus, whose story (and stories) continually fascinates and beckons us.

Grim and Chilling Powers

Jesus came to break the age-old patterns of domination and submission and to live into God's new reality of peace, service and forgiveness. The hymn recognizes the attraction of domination (it "towers and gleams") and the pervasiveness of sin, which "infects" (spreads like a disease), "deceives" and "ensnares" (traps us and holds us captive).

In saying that "death, dispatched to foreign lands, will turn again, and find us all," I do not intend to support the delusion that "we must fight terrorists in Iraq so that we don't have to fight them here." I have in mind the way domination systems (even in a democracy) make successive U.S. governments all too quick to project killing power elsewhere, with little regard for the human beings who get in the way. But we are mortal, and death will take us all.

Is It True?

Now, as in his lifetime, people react to Jesus in different ways: faith, doubt, and disbelief among others; as in Simeon's words to Joseph and Mary in Luke 2:33-35: "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed." We preach to people who doubt, hope without knowing, cling to faith, or feel the Spirit's power as they joyfully believe. It may be worth unpacking some of these phrases together with the conclusion that, from our different responses which also include both peace of mind and "anxious certainty," "we worship, trust, and rise to serve an infant learning how to feed."