

01/01/1999

Dear Jemima

Well, that's a great name for a start, particularly when you realise that your darling mother nearly called you Prudence. Or was it Constance? Whatever, there's clearly no scope for serial misbehaviour with a Pru or a Connie cramping your style. Jemima, on the other hand, promises plenty of spark. Your dad called you Sonic for a while – after a hedgehog! Now, I am not going to criticise your dad. I am sure he had good reasons for thinking that you resembled a small and very prickly thing. It's just that in your case I think he was wrong.

So, very little and not at all prickly Jemima, welcome. I remember when my first daughter was born: her mother, after 26 hours of labour, and so tired that sleep enfolded her between contractions, finally reached down, drew up her curious and wide-awake newly born and welcomed her with a voice so old and so ancient. She said, simply, hello baby, but the words were slow and drawn out, full of passion and fire. It was as though they had come in over thousands of years, encompassing every birth, every greeting, every mother's pain and joy, wrapping up life itself, its mystery and wonder and pouring all of that into our baby's soul. So, when I say welcome, this is how I welcome you.

I am one of your Godfathers. I have loved your mama and your papa for a long time and that is usually how Godparents are selected. I was with you when you were baptised into the Roman Catholic Church and I said then that I would help in your spiritual growth. Boy, is that an undertaking or what? Firstly, I am not a Catholic; secondly, we are on different continents; thirdly, what you are expecting, quite reasonably, is a present at Christmas, another on your birthday, and as little lecturing as possible. For the next sixteen years, the primeval power that is Africa will wash over you, filling your cup with its mysticism, and the music of its wilderness and you will never know it. Your father will show you God in crystals of frankincense, and your mother will introduce Him to you in white stone churches, and He will be, in turn, wonderful and boring.

On your seventeenth birthday, you will wake and from then on you will be free; free to decide what to believe and what not to believe, whom to worship and whom not to worship, whether to seek or whether to commit; and that will be the beginning of your spiritual growth. It is said that the Jesuits claim: give us a child until he is seven and he is ours for life. Is there value in that, in that indoctrination, in that conditioning? If, in the innocence of your seventeen years, or the energy of your twenties, or the achievements of your thirties, or the re-appraisal of your forties, if at any time you were to step outside yourself and, from that

observation, say: Yes, He is for me, would that simple realisation not be worth a hundred churches and a thousand priests? Would the flame that now burned in your heart, the commitment freely given, not stand testament to a bond between you and your Maker? So, question everything, take nothing for granted and when the first incandescent fragments of truth appear before you, recognise them, seize them, nourish them, build upon them because without growth you can never hope for beauty, or joy or compassion or love.

Do I have authority to talk to you like this? I don't think so. I am as likely to learn from you as you are from me. I am no expert and no holy man and my understanding may be flawed and incomplete but, for all that it is worth, this is it:

Before the beginning there was God, omnipotent and omnipresent. In the beginning, God divided into two: the Witness and the Creator. The Hindus describe the division as the Om; it may be that this is what St John refers to when he writes about "The Word". The Witness is the male presence, the Father, who observes and enjoys the creation. The Creator is the female power, the Mother, who creates the universe. In the Holy Trinity, the Father is the Witness and the Holy Spirit is the Mother, the Creator.

Before Man, the creation was perfect, continually evolving, beautiful and exquisite. After Man, it became something different, something more. When the Creator granted Man freedom, She committed the Father to the pain of rejection and the joy of acceptance. The Creator made Man in the Father's image so that He could see Himself in Her creation. Each Man is a mirror into which the Father looks to see Himself. If the mirror is dark, tarnished and clouded, then the Father sees nothing of His own glory; but if the mirror is clean and bright, the Father sees Himself clearly and His joy is immeasurable.

Over and over again, The Holy Spirit, the Mother, the Creator has sent Her sons and daughters to bless Her creation and to give guidance to its most precious part: they came for innocence and wisdom, creativity and beauty, wealth and well-being, courage and duty, detachment and respect, forgiveness and resurrection.

The scriptures of all religions are full of truth and purity, if you look for it. You will also find opinion dressed up as fact, zealotry dressed up as faith and domination dressed up as obedience. Look for truth in the lives of those that came, not in the writings of those who came after; truth may exist there too but two thousand years of Christ follower set against Christ follower has mocked His flawless, divine and dazzling life. God is not owned by any one Church. Whether we come to Him through Christ or Mohammed or Ganesha, makes no difference. What matters is that, through our seeking, we find Him and that in our hearts a small candle burns, brightly enough that He can look into the mirror of our souls and see something of Himself.

I have never written to a Godchild before. It is strange watching the words fill the pages knowing that you will not read them for so many

years. I have written them, removed them, written them again, removed them again, struggling to say something, thinking it should be light and simple and full of laughter, but always they have come back, serious and intense. So, I have acquiesced and hope that other letters on other days, letters that are not the first letter, will make amends. As I write, I do not know you; you are small and distant. If there is something of your mother and something of your father in you, you will be fortunate indeed. I hope we will communicate. I am here watching.