

First Sunday after Christmas 2019

On Thursday morning we celebrated St Stephen's Day. The Eucharist was offered with all due solemnity, red vestments were worn to remind us of the martyrdom of Stephen the proto-martyr. But the preface to the Eucharistic prayer was not for martyrs but for Christmas. Every day is Christmas Day in this octave of the feast. After the service we all adjourned to the coolness of the Lamerton centre for Champagne, minced pies and Christmas cake. I didn't detect a whiff of guilt or a concern about our waistlines! In Coles they were selling Hot Cross Buns. Many outside the Church tell me that Christianity is just a guilt trip; my we live in strange times.

Many it seems had been waiting since mid-October for the Christmas festivities, such is the modern enthusiasm to get us to open our wallets. But I wonder how those folk feel once Christmas Day arrives, given the weight of expectation. I can only imagine that many are disappointed, perhaps guilty? I wonder if they feel it's just another guilt trip! Perhaps some are afraid to really engage.

In 1942 the poet WH Auden wrote an oratorio called 'For the time being.' It is very long. Benjamin Britten warned Auden that it was far too long to be performed – it remains today an oratorio without music. At one point towards the end of the oratorio Auden writes prophetically:

Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes –
Some have got broken – and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week –
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted – quite unsuccessfully –
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.
The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of an unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday which cannot, after all, now
Be very far off. But, for the time being, here we all are,
Back in the moderate Aristotelian city
Of darning and the Eight-Fifteen, where Euclid's geometry
And Newton's mechanics would account for our experience,
And the kitchen table exists because I scrub it.
It seems to have shrunk during the holidays. The streets
Are much narrower than we remembered; we had forgotten
The office was as depressing as this. To those who have seen
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.

For the innocent children who whispered so excitedly
Outside the locked door where they knew the presents to be
Grew up when it opened. Now, recollecting that moment
We can repress the joy, but the guilt remains conscious;
Remembering the stable where for once in our lives
Everything became a You and nothing was an It.

It says so much about the way that Christmas is for so many. It has clearly become such a letdown for some that they are frantic for Easter and Hot Cross buns. Why are we so keen to move on the next big thing? Why can't we live in the time being? What is it that makes Auden call it the most trying time of all?

Clearly in our world we cannot bear to live in the present, it is too demanding! Many retreat into the past to the way things used to be or they look to future and worry about the dystopian future that awaits us all! Neither of these approaches are consistent with our Christian faith. Inherent in our Biblical and liturgical tradition is both the wonderment, the enchantment that comes with Christmas and Easter *and* the reality of the world around us. The coming of God into our world is something that upsets our easy complacency and for many it is too great a challenge. As much as we like the idea, the reality for many it seems, is all too much to bear. I'm intrigued by Auden's line 'We can repress the joy, but the guilt remains conscious.' It seems that we are in a state of paralysis: guilt, fear, doubt, lack of trust, boredom even... they all create a situation in which we cannot grow, move forward. We cannot know wonderment and enchantment, we cannot live.

The King Herod of Auden's oratorio is a character a little like that of Jesus Christ Superstar – you might remember the famous line of Herod to Jesus...show to me that you're no fool, walk across my swimming pool! In the oratorio Herod, contemplating the grisly slaughter of the innocents, comes across as a cheerful, mid-20th century bureaucrat pleased with himself for modern innovations (sandwiches and soft drinks in all the inns) and peace in the streets. But this radical Christ Child could bring social chaos, and then where would he be? "Justice will be replaced by Pity as the cardinal human virtue, and all fear of retribution will vanish," frets Auden's Herod. Unfortunately, he just can't let that happen and he calls in the troops. Herod is presented as the ultimate liberal humanist who, in defense of reason and the laws of enlightened civilization, believes he must resort to mass murder, euthanasia. Maintaining fear and doubt and all those things that hold us back is the way to a quiet, ordered society.

Joseph and Mary enter a desert world of travel brochures and advertising banality. Egypt's "safety" is a real danger to spiritual security. The holy family's flight to Egypt is seen as a reversal of the Exodus event. Wouldn't it be so much easier if they could just stay there and with them all those other dreadful traditions of liberation and freedom!?

Close to the end the narrator returns us to the present and the end of a modern family Christmas in the modern world of scientific causes and reasons as we heard. However, for "those who have seen the Child, the Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all." Our reading from Hebrews is the antidote, we are told that the coming of Christ, making of us his brothers and sisters, is the end of fear and doubt. The Christ is at one with us in our testing and trials, this truly is a moment to be grasped, to be relished and celebrated!

Can I encourage you to celebrate unashamedly, live abundantly, enjoy unreservedly, and without a whiff of guilt live in this moment when every day is Christmas day. Amen.