

Be the change you wish to see

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Revd Linda Anshell
21 December 2003, Advent 4 (St Thomas)

Micah 5: 2-5a; Song of Mary; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

I hope you will forgive me some confusion today. It is a confusing time after all! Is it Christmas or is it Advent? Carols tonight, and then so quickly we return for Christmas services... and more organised people already have their decorations up. Queanbeyan is aglow! And... it is St Thomas's Day. Is he the saint of confusion?

I have read Michael's [Michael Carden] new chapter on Micah and discovered just what a confusing book it is! And re read an old essay on the Magnificat, and discovered all of Luke is in it... And how revolutionary it is!

The Alexandrian allegory in Hebrews really confuses me. Old sacrificial covenants give way to new covenants... but they still hang onto sacrificial language!

Micah shifts and changes as he gives a message of judgement to a country facing Assyrian domination and, later, destruction and exile by Babylon. But the words of judgement are to Jerusalem and Samaria, not to the two imperial powers! Confusion of oppressor and oppressed point out confusions in our own world; in our own lives....

Ambiguity is ever present.

Just consider Israel and Palestine. Both places have had leaders once labelled terrorist. [Ben Gurion and Arafat.] Both are caught up in an even larger story of power and oppression that we tend not to listen to! Even Micah might be seen as a part of that story, although I was originally thinking of including Europe and the powers in the world during the twentieth century.

But despite the message of judgement, Micah still has that promise:

One shall ... "come from Bethlehem"

"and they shall live secure..

and he shall be one of peace."

But still there is the time of waiting and the birth pangs. [from Hebrews] A body you have prepared for me....

A body

Of the earth; the soil....

But also, we must not forget that we are also of the earth, the soil. We are made of this stuff of humus.... compost...

a body was prepared, and it was a human body, of the earth.

of this stuff.... [a handful of compost???

enfleshed.... incarnate.....

the stuff of the earth and yet the hope of salvation....

the one Micah calls — "one of peace"

in Hebrews — "we have been sanctified through the body of Christ"

Elizabeth names [Mary as] "the mother of my Lord"

we look to the stars to foretell our futures, we look to the stars to grasp the mystery of the universe, and yet here in a body, a child, and in the labour pangs of the mother, here is written the most mysterious of stories. Hebrews confuses me because I wonder if it is referring to Christmas or to Easter....

If "the body" refers to sacrifice, then it is Easter, but then again, if that is right, then that continues the allegory of the old sacrificial system and that is a system which has been destroyed! [*** I suspect that the allegory has imprisoned us!***]

But it is nearly Christmas. Perhaps it is time to think differently about the "sacrifice" of Christ. ... not in terms of death so much as in terms of incarnation... .. of birth

And incarnation is confusing because it involves god becoming human....

Much of Hebrews depends heavily on allegory, but in the long run, christian thought is unambiguous. This child is the second person of the Trinity... That is not to say that the very idea of Trinity isn't ambiguous! Of course it is! But here we have in Christmas, a story that separates us from the other people of the book, both Jewish and Muslim.

And yet it is to a Jewish commentator that I turn for a special word today. Avivah Zornberg was in Sydney recently and fortunately spoke on the ABC. I listened to one of the interviews she gave on her book on Exodus....

She writes of this great story and hears within it the many different levels of story. She speaks of the enslaved Hebrews in Egypt. The Egyptians wanted to eliminate the Hebrews, and so they attempted to have every male child killed, but we know from the story that one child, Moses, escaped that... We even know the names of the midwives who refused to kill children!

But there is also the story of the separation of the men and women, so there will be no more children anyway! But there were ways and means of meeting... imaginative... in the story, they played mirror games so all children came from the mirror. Zornberg concludes that only imaginative truth, not reality truth, will produce children, be productive, will continue life, be creative....

Incarnation is such an imaginative truth... it is a truth which is productive, and which gives and continues life.

Incarnation, the imaginative reality of god made human, god in human form, is for me the touchstone of a "god touched world"; of a world that is passionately loved by god... that was passionately loved into being....

and a world that passionately desires god....

Mary visits Elizabeth and two passionate women meet.

[Did the young, unmarried and pregnant Mary travel to get some relief from home?]
What a greeting Elizabeth gives her! What an affirmation!

"The mother of my Lord"

and Mary responds with her special song of praise.

Words of reversal

The proud are scattered in their thoughts;
.....The powerful unseated

and
... the lowly lifted up.

The hungry are fed
and
... the rich are sent away empty.

Not a song to be sung lightly. It was banned in British India as the Independence movement strengthened. I wonder what Evensong felt like without the Magnificat? (Did its absence speak more eloquently of justice and freedom?)

An incarnate god is a god that is passionate, that is passionately alive.

The prophecies of reversal and peace come from a god that is part of the confusion that we live. A confusion of life and death, of hopes and fears, of power and powerlessness.

Our part is to live our lives in all of their confusion, with all of the passion we can muster, drawn from the earth and reaching to the stars! And to know that God lives it with us and seeks to give us the courage we need.

I am told I should use the Ghandi quote: "you must be the change you wish to see in the world." (Jeanette and Chris both used it quite independently, and it does fit!)

But I confess I would rather hint at Lorca's Duende, the passion that rises from the earth... and suggest that we should feel the passion of being from the earth....

and also tell the story of the seraphim. As the seraphs sing Holy Holy Holy I am told that they incinerate on the first Holy! such is the passion in their alleluias! (*Annie Dillard)

May your eye catch fire ... That god by you be seen

May your ear catch fire ... That god by you be heard

May your tongue catch fire ... That god by you be named

May your heart catch fire ... That god by you be loved

May your mind catch fire ... That god by you be known.

A footnote: a lot of the above sermon was not used... I am increasingly thinking of the message of Hebrews: That Christ is both our High Priest and King. (within the allegory?) These are the two traditional sources of human power over other people. (either from the threat of damnation —"priest", or from the "barrel of the gun" — "king") but while this thought was swirling through my head as I delivered both sermons, it did not get articulated!

Michael Carden is preparing a commentary on "the twelve minor prophets". The confusion in Micah that he alerted me to is noted fully in Erin Runion's commentary.

Runions, Erin, (2001) *Changing Subjects: Gender, Nation And Future In Micah* (London: Sheffield Academic Press)

I passed quickly over "Duende", an idea which is being discussed in Pat Forbes' singing classes. (The passion that rises from the earth...) Lorca's classic essay on this is available on the web. (from: <http://www.musicpsyche.org/writings1.html> look for:

Lorca — The Duende) An interesting page on it is at
<http://www.angelindevilsboots.com/trainspotting/origins/duende.html>