

God among us

St Phillip's Anglican Church, O'Connor
Sermon for the first Sunday of Christmas, Year A — 29 December 2013
Revd Canon Dr Scott Cowdell

Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2: 10-18; Matthew 2: 13-23

Reflecting on today's readings I was reminded of a book I read some year's back called *How Starbucks Saved My Life*. It's by an American corporate high-flier called Michael Gates Gill, who found himself washed up at 64-made redundant, divorced, cleaned out financially, with a new much-loved son to be sure, though without his new girlfriend (the boy's mother), who'd left him, too. One day he was brooding over a latte at Starbucks—a treat he could no longer really afford—not knowing that he'd walked in on a hiring event.

Something made the manager notice the balding man at the next table, still trying to look the part with his \$2,000 suit and briefcase, and half-jokingly she offered him a job—which he found himself accepting!

And thus his life began to turn around.

This isn't a rags to riches story, though with a movie likely to be made of the book, I think Mike, as he was known at Starbucks, will soon find himself back in the money. Rather, this is the story of a self-proclaimed master of the universe—a moneyed, Yale-educated, up-town New Yorker with lots of New England connections; a one time workaholic and boss from hell whose cultivated hardness had damaged subordinates, colleagues and his own children—who became a wiser, more compassionate and a happier man. He had to do a basic job that proved as hard as anything he'd ever done, and rub shoulders as equals with a cast of youngsters at Starbucks, mostly working class African Americans of a type he'd rarely met in the advertising world, and who he'd never treated before with anything but contempt.

Mike's 28 year-old boss was a smart black woman who treated him firmly but fairly. Under her guidance, he learned how to make bathrooms sparkle, and treat the homeless with respect, whose only access to a toilet in New York City was often at Starbucks. He learned to open the shop, getting all the food displays just right, learned to close it at night, with all the cleaning and rubbish carting. He mastered not only the cash-register that terrified him, but the espresso machine, and all the many fancy coffee drinks that Australians marvel at when they go to Starbucks. He also learned from the service ethos of this company, and the culture of respect towards staff and customers. Once imprisoned by class, an attitude of superiority, and a harsh business ethic that reflected a life ruled by fear, Mike found himself a much-respected and loved team member at Starbucks, who won service awards. Soon the former Madison Avenue Ad man was amazing his grown-up children by his new respect for working people. His cheerful willingness to work for a young black woman, who he came to love and respect, greatly amazed his youngest daughter—the student activist. As for Mike's colleagues at Starbucks, they were most encouraged by this obviously educated, much older man who came to love them and their company and believe in what they were selling, so they were able to do their jobs better because Mike was in it with them.

Now why am I telling you all about Mike and his remarkable story? Because our readings today on this first Sunday of Christmas tell us that our God also knows the human struggle from the inside, and so is very near to us. Our God is not the remote cosmic Lord that many people resent, that others fear, and that few if any can feel genuinely close to. Michael Gates

Gill became a man of attractive, generous humility and compassion by sharing the world of unspectacular people, finding that the ordinary human world is often quite extraordinary. He suffered, failed, had to learn, grow and change, and all that's just as it should be for one of us. Jesus was just the same. And because God chose to make God's way as one of us, sharing our challenges, limitations and struggles, we can come to know God differently now.

This is the burden of our wonderful Hebrews reading today, in which for the love of humanity God in Jesus Christ shares our suffering, our life under the pressure of death, and by going through our temptations is able to lead us beyond the power of sin. He didn't come to help angels we're told—we're not unconstrained, disembodied beings like the angels; rather, we're complex and conflicted, savage and sexual, remarkable and adaptable creatures of earth. So is the son of God, and 'Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested', as our Hebrews passage concludes today.

Our two readings today from the Old Testament tell the same story. Isaiah proclaims God's love for Israel and God's presence with Israel in person, not via some messenger or angel, carrying Israel personally during seasons of hardship in the old times. No wonder the Gospel writers looked to Isaiah for words and images to help them express their confidence that in Jesus, God's presence with God's people has reached a wholly new level. Our Psalm today, no. 148, is a great cosmic hymn of praise to God, with every aspect of creation joining in the hymn. But the climax is not about heavens and mountains and seas, but about God's beloved people Israel: 'His glory is above earth and heaven, and he has lifted high the horn of his people', as we read—'a people that is near him. Praise the Lord'.

Our Gospel from Matthew today offers us a truly remarkable trio of allegories that make this point most clearly—about God coming to dwell in the midst of Israel, sharing its sufferings. The first allegory is the holy family's flight into Egypt, which is the journey Israel took in the Old Testament. The second is the slaughter of the innocents by Herod, which recalls the slaughter of the Jewish Children by Pharaoh, from which Moses was spared. By the way, Roman historians of the day who left no atrocity of Herod unchronicled didn't mention this one in today's Gospel—because of course it's an allegory. A third allegory linking Jesus to the story of Israel in today's Gospel is Jesus' return from Egypt, just as Moses came up out of Egypt with the liberated people of Israel. Here, in today's Gospel, an ancient audience of Jewish Christians would have heard their own story of exile in Egypt and liberation thanks to Moses retold in the story of Jesus. In this way they'd come to realise that, in Jesus, God is truly among us, sharing our human story and our human suffering. So Jesus becomes God's unrivalled agent of human liberation.

Friends, all this invites us to experience a transformed spiritual imagination. A faraway God draws near. An impossibly remote God becomes intimate. A detached and impersonal God chooses to stand shoulder to shoulder with us amid all the blood and confusion and self-doubt and false starts of human history—with a smile and a knowing wink, with tears and a strong human arm to lean on.

St Francis of Assisi gave us the Christmas crib, in the thirteenth century, to remind us of this lesson—of the lowly human Jesus as no less than God with us, which the Christian imagination had begun to recapture from the twelfth century. And don't we need this vision today? In our day compassion runs cold, and God becomes the slogan for making war, just as belief comes adrift as clever atheists go public with their rejection of a remote and disconnected deity. But this is the very deity that Jesus has already put an end to, in the manger and on the cross. Christian faith offers us instead the Gospel of God among us. This is the only God that many of us can bear to believe in today.

Michael Gates Gill will never be the same again, having discovered dignity and compassion and solidarity in the company of ordinary people trying to serve others in the midst of a teeming metropolis. Neither can God ever be the same again, touched once and for all by the human adventure of Jesus. This is forever part of God's inner life now, as the Ascension imagines it for us, with Jesus raised to the right hand of God. The human adventure at the heart of God's life in the Church's Trinitarian faith is our best remedy for atheism, for resentment and for feeling that God is too far away for the likes of us. Instead, God among us—the remarkable imaginative breakthrough of Christian orthodoxy—is the good news of Christmas, and it changes everything.