

Christmass Midnight 2019

Do you struggle to shake off your rather naïve ideas about the nature of God? I do! Even after many years of theologising. Well, Christmas is the time to dust off your misconceptions! Do away with your Sunday school days and get serious! I rather like this Victorian hymn that ends:

*O wonder of wonders, which none can unfold:
The Ancient of days is an hour or two old;
The Maker of all things is made of the earth,
Man is worshipped by angels, and God comes to birth:*

The Church has no place in politics, is a catch cry that we often hear and we have heard it often this past year. Trying to create a definite separation of Church and State is just not possible. The political systems of the modern western world are indeed a child of Christendom. A sort of separation occurred in the 13th and 14th centuries when the popes got the state out of the business of regulating sin and the state got the popes out of the business of regulating crime. No bad thing, but then came the problem of the separating those two things!

What we should say, I believe, is that the Church has not place in partisan politics. The Church does not (read, should not) think in terms of left and right as conventionally imagined. And that is, I believe, a very healthy place for a theologian, a bishop, or indeed a church, to be. What we as the Church must do is lift our heads from the trenches of contemporary media-driven political controversy, we need to be involved in drawing minds and hearts toward a converted culture that is neither what T.S. Eliot called 'ringing the bell backwards', in other words neither looking to the good old days, nor trying to keep up with the latest trends in society, the Church should be about an all-encompassing vision. 'Christmas come on down!!!'

The adults in this biblical story all have something political to say, have you noticed that? First Mary shortly after Jesus' conception:

He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.

When John the Baptist is born his Father finds his tongue and sings:
By the tender mercy of our God,
 the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
 to guide our feet into the way of peace.

When Jesus is born the Angels, I presume they count as adults sang:

Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!

And when Jesus is presented as a baby in the Temple we hear the old Priest say that he is be:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.

These statements are all political dynamite in the context of the day; they have nothing to do with left or right, not how we understand it, but how we live together. Remember peace in this context is shalom. The great German theologian Gerhard Von Rad wrote 'we constrict the term Shalom if we equate it with peace.' Shalom is intrinsically tied up with wholeness, wellness, and justice. But there's more! Even these giants of the faith didn't altogether grasp the magnitude of Emmanuel 'God with us.' And you can't blame them we haven't yet grasped it either after two thousand years! We are still caught up in a vision of God that never was! It is for good reason that the messiah was recognized as a baby, a homeless one at that and of dodgy parentage. The messiah is the voiceless, the young and the yet to be born. The child messiah transcends so called adult politicking. A child cannot vote or have any kind of voice. But a child is all about the future, not the next poll or the next election, but the future; *the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight*, as the carol famously says.

And because of this Christmas is above all the season of hope tinged with fear! The prophets that we have been listening to, including John the Baptist over these past weeks of Advent have been telling us to get ready – straighten your paths, make them level and smooth... but I'm not really convinced that their listeners really understood what they were preparing for. They are famous for being harbingers of doom and are generally ignored because of it, but the coming of a child speaks a different message. The coming of a child says that yes we should acknowledge our fears but we must also live lives of hopefulness, because the future is embodied *in a child*.

The Christian faith is deeply political, but it is subversive of the politics that so often part of our world and this is why many folk don't want it in the body politic. Christianity should speak into the political machinations of our day by stating clearly 'what of the child in the manger?' What of the future? What of those whose futures we are now creating? Are we builders of hope?

Like me I expect you have watched with interest the rise of Greta Thunberg, Time magazine's person of the year. She has created discussion and debate, she has mobilised the young (and the not so young). She is still very young, unable to vote and has been at best ignored at worse ridiculed by many in authority. She is not messiah (she is also not 'a very naughty girl') her prophecies of doom have mobilised a generation, but what of the message of hope... what of the message of the Christ child?

The politics of those preparing for the messiah were pretty conventional, what was subversive was the way Jesus went about fulfilling them. He set about giving all people a future - A very happy and holy Christmas to you all, and a 2020 filled with justice, peace, and joy and the hope that these bring. Amen.