

Christmas: God is Like Alfred Hitchcock

Sermon for Christmas Day (2nd Mass) 2020

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor ACT Australia

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

Isaiah 52: 7-10; Psalm 98; Hebrews 1: 1-4; John 1: 1-14

+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. AMEN

For my first Christmas as a young parish priest I thought I'd be 'with it' and use a popular movie to illustrate John's gospel of the Word made flesh. I wanted to compare the Word, the Logos, the principle of God's underlying rationality present in nature and history according to early Christians, with the force—you know the one, 'the force be with you'. So, to start I asked the capacity congregation "who's seen 'Star Wars'"? And only one hand went up!

Well, nearly thirty years on, I'm sufficiently over it to try again with a movie illustration, and a question to kick it off, so here goes: who's ever seen a movie by the great

Hollywood director Alfred Hitchcock? ... Well, so far, so good. Let's try a further question: what do you always have to look out for in every Alfred Hitchcock movie—or, more correctly, *who* do you always have to look out for? ... That's right.

Phew! Yes, Alfred Hitchcock himself, who puts a walk-on part for himself in every one of his films—a face in the crowd, perhaps, or a passer-by. For instance, about 11 minutes into *Strangers on a Train*, as Guy Haines (played by Farley Granger) climbs down off the train, he nearly bumps into Hitchcock who's struggling up the narrow steps with a cello case.

I don't know why Hitchcock did this. Perhaps he was like an artist signing the corner of a painting, signifying authorship, or maybe to let us know how invested he was in his creations—signifying that he put a lot of himself into the making of every picture. Going deeper, might he have been wanting to identify with the human drama that he was portraying, this American Shakespeare who was an astute observer of the human condition—of how desires shape the

desires of others, for instance, and how human groups turn to scapegoating in the face of a crisis?

Well, Christians believe that God is deeply invested in our world, enough to want to be part of it in person—not leaving us to it, to get on as best we can, but not intruding on us either. As the great director was present in his films, so Jesus came among us as a stranger, a passer-by, and wasn't much recognised for who he was—in the words of today's Gospel, "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him". And he wasn't always welcome, either, as we'll be reminded here at Easter time—"He came to what was his own, and his own people received him not".

But, friends, God thought that this was the best way to demonstrate his love for human beings and for the world: by becoming incarnate as we say—enfleshed, that is—choosing to be in the thick of it with us, always available, but discreetly, letting the drama play out. God lets us humans

strut and fret our hour on the stage without looming over us and distracting us and spoiling the play.

Now, after the year we've had there's comfort to be had in this central imaginative insight of Christian faith. So many have been doing it tough in 2020, yet in light of today's Gospel we can affirm that the God of Jesus Christ was present, and involved with them, even when he wasn't recognised: among the crowds of dazed townspeople on that smoke-choked beach at Mallacoota, for instance; or with firefighters in their times of exhaustion and mortal danger, while present too with stunned homeowners as they surveyed the ruin of their dreams.

We can picture Jesus at the frontline of COVID 19 and its impact: in intensive care units as patients slipped away with no-one else by their bedsides; at the kitchen table when families couldn't make the numbers add up to save their businesses; or lining up in one of those long queues we thought we'd never see in Australia, snaking their way round and round the Centrelink office. I can also imagine Jesus

present wherever anxiety, frustration and the slippage of reason threatened to bring minds and marriages and families undone, fostering who knows what restraint, what restoration of perspective.

Jesus was there as party animals became accustomed to solitude, as playboys adjusted to being house-husbands, as sleep-deprived shift workers took on the added burden of schoolkids at home, and as unemployed musicians began livestreaming from their loungerooms, all trying hard to keep their chins up. Jesus walked the empty streets of our CBDs, he watched and listened during National Cabinet meetings, and he sat alongside worn out leaders at their wits end as part of whatever chemistry it is that leads to wise decisions. And now that our long-awaited Christmas is here at last, Jesus sits quietly with those at home or abroad whose separation, which seemed like it might be over, has now cruelly been extended.

But Jesus also rejoices with families and loved ones who can at last be together. Christmas partying is entirely Christian

after all, picking up on the joy of our Old Testament readings today. Our Psalm imagines the whole created world joining in a great musical celebration in the temple. Our Christmas trees and holly remind us that the celebration of Jesus' birth is an event not just for humans but for the whole world of matter and living things. Our Isaiah reading today celebrates Israel's national fortunes suddenly coming good, with a messenger of liberation gladly made welcome—and with hindsight Christians identified this messenger with Jesus.

In our Hebrews passage today, the whole cosmos recognises Jesus as the hidden clue to it all, exalted now over all created things including the angels, recognised for who he was all along: the exact imprint of God's very being. Friends, here we see the Christian imagination at full stretch, as the hidden God, the discreet God, is recognised among us in the person of Jesus.

Today friends, and every day, the God of Jesus Christ shuns the limelight, refusing to rudely interrupt our little hour on the stage. Likewise, here in the Eucharist God comes to us

veiled in the suggestiveness of our sacred texts, in the human faces of our fellow travellers, and sacramentally, as we say—really, genuinely, that is, but self-effacingly—in the material forms of bread and wine. But we believe that the God of Jesus Christ is present nonetheless, to be recognised by those whose eyes have been trained to see. This is one major reason why we gather here week by week: to hear the stories over and over, to celebrate and receive the sacrament, to share in the community life of our parish, and hence to sharpen our perception.

Alfred Hitchcock's movies are still great even if you never see the great auteur unobtrusively present in the midst of the action. But it's always a delight to recognise him, bringing an extra dimension to the film, and it's a shame to miss out.

The Lord be with you ...