

Christmas Morning and the Hidden God

St Philip's Anglican Church, Canberra ACT Australia

25 December 2023

The Reverend Canon Professor Scott Cowdell

John 1.1-14

+In the Name of the Father & of the Son & of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

While I was waiting for a haircut in Civic this week, I took a stroll around the Sydney Building and found myself outside Mooseheads—that notorious late-night haunt of well-lubricated cadets from the Defence Force Academy. My eye was drawn to the dress code posted by the front door—no flouros, no work boots, no singlets, no thongs etc. and then this: “No teeth, No entry!” Clearly, they're wary of under-dressed tradies but especially of methheads.

It was much the same in Bethlehem that night when the Holy Family, with Mary about to give birth, was barred from the inn. Martin Luther summed it up with characteristic frankness in a Christmas sermon:

When now they were come to Bethlehem, the Evangelist says that they were, of all, the lowest and the most despised, and must make way for everyone until they were shoved into a stable to make a common lodging and table with the cattle, while many cutthroats lounged like lords in the inn. They did not recognize what God was doing in the stable. With all their eating, drinking, and finery, God left them empty, and this comfort and treasure was hidden from them. ... Thus God shows that he has no regard for what the world is and has and does. And the world shows that it does not know or consider what God is and has and does.

In John's gospel, which tells the Christmas story without the birth narrative, we hear that God came to God's own people in Jesus Christ, yet God's own people didn't recognise him, or want him. So, just like in Bethlehem but more generally, God isn't what today's people expect, or even what they want.

For lots of people God represents an intellectual problem, and a moral problem—a failed explanation for how the world is, given what science teaches us, and given how terrible things can be in a world that God's supposed to be looking after.

For others God is a burden, a hindrance, an intrusive big brother whose house we need to leave if we're to find freedom and our own proper path in life. And who can blame at least some of these people for thinking that way, given that the Church—supposedly God's representative—too often presses sanctions on the struggling when it's blessings they crave?

For others still, God is the cosmic conservative, or the cosmic plumber, who sets up and then maintains a status quo in which they come out on top, with those they don't like or approve of kept down: the god of authoritarian populists everywhere, for sure, but also the god of ordinary people who don't envisage any challenge or expectation of conversion from God—a god much like an insurance policy, then, but with optional hymns.

Or there's the God of Christmas who we meet today in the Eucharist, the God of Jesus Christ. This God is not like these other popular versions; this God is typically neither recognized nor welcomed in our world, even today—just like the Holy Family barred from the inn then shoved

out the back; just like the word made flesh in John's gospel, yet also the word made unwanted. And just like all the searching and yearning and unwanted and uncared for in our world, too—in our communities, in our own spheres perhaps, maybe even we ourselves. All of them, all of us, find an unlikely friend at Christmas in this Jesus, in this God, who shares our circumstances yet who promises to change them profoundly.

Who would have expected that today we meet a God in profound solidarity with the human condition, and who's found a reliable way into our world and into our hearts, for all the indifference and opposition?

The Lord be with you ...