

CHRISTMAS DAY
25 December 2004

Mark the Evangelist

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

The baring of God's holy arm: Light, which overcomes the darkness

Sydney Carter was famous for his songs, which drew on folk traditions of music. One of his most enduring creations was Lord of the Dance, which is still in our Hymnbook. He was also a poet who wrestled continually with faith and doubt and in doing so often threw out a challenge to false forms of security and religiosity. In a collection titled Love More Or Less, is poem titled The Candlelight.

I am the candlelight,
I do not say there is a god,
I only say hello.

Out of nothingness
I most improbably come
and back again I go.

I am no messenger.
The thing I actually am
is all I ever show.

By me you travel up the stairs to bed,
By me you read the Gospel
of St John.

My fire is physical.
I have a body made of wax
and soon it will be gone.

I am a miracle like
you, I contradict the night
and then I travel on.

The imagery here is engaging as well as disturbing. Carter aims not to speak of God, and yet engages us with a penetrating image that is at the same time limited. The wonder of the candlelight is that it is physical, and yet has the power to contradict the night. There is a link here with a central symbol in the Gospel for today: the light, which the darkness has never overcome.

The thing I actually am
is all I ever show.

The Hebrews were not given to speculate about the inner life of God. The only real way to talk about God was in terms of action, which caused a revelation in the world. God was regarded as mysterious and unknowable. God was timeless and bodiless, the source and power of all life. God was light, which transcended the power of Sun, Moon and Stars. Our tradition is that we know of God through the "effects" of God's action amongst us. That is why when we are asked to say something about God, we inevitably

have to respond by speaking about something that occurs amongst people. It is like that in Isaiah. When he speaks of the baring of God's holy arm in the sight of all nations he is not talking about supernatural events. The gathering chorus of exultant joy in Isaiah's poem comes from seeing life and liberty granted those who were once estranged and depleted in exile. The homeward journey of this motley crew is the power of God at work. This is the event of the utmost beauty - and beauty here is not a static thing. It is something living and active, but so ordinary we may hardly have noticed it. The prophets called people to live in the light of knowing God as present to us as a liberating force in relationships, the power that enabled life for people in the world. This force, this power, was the light of life.

What was true for the prophets is so in the New Testament. Talk about God is always connected to things that happen in relationships, especially as they are connected with Jesus of Nazareth. He is the teller and the telling point of the story of the unseen God. The message here is that transcendent reality, remote and mysterious as it is, is found, known and expressed in the complete humanness of a life that touches parents, relatives, shepherds, inn keepers, tax collectors, prostitutes, Government authorities, paranoid rulers. In him the essence of the divine life was expressed in our flesh and our conversations where it challenged us to revalue all our structures of human meaning. His presence was and is a challenge to the horizons and identity of every person. With him around, things could not stay the same. Our carols repeat this theme.

In John's prologue the Word of God is the connecting link. By the Word he means - an active, creative principle emanating from the Divine Mystery which was fully embodied in a human life. By this means of self-disclosure God enters into our conversation and provides us with a window into a deeper reality. ... in him was life, and that life was the light of all: John is telling us that the creative force at work in this one was the same as the Source itself. The thing I actually am...

Whatever we think of Christmas, we can't go past John's message: Jesus was the transmitter to us of an action, which spoke of Divine Love. John's central concern is not with the Divine Love in itself, but with the significance this act of love made visible has for us. It offers us another possibility, to live in the light; that is to say, to join ourselves to the force, which seems small and weak, but has the power, the strength to contradict the surrounding darkness.

We know about Darkness: misfortune, death, evil deeds. We know how our families don't turn out as we hoped. We know how people near us suffer the most incredible setbacks and limitations and have their horizons foreclosed. Many families represented here today have struggled against the darkness in 2004. At a social level we observe the encroachment of the darkness, in youths who brought about a tramp's death when they burned his home for fun. When young, educated people in Canberra did nothing while Anu Singh plotted to murder Joe Cinque. And now, while people starve and die in Darfur someone pays \$65,000 to have their cat cloned. If we are given to watching the TV news, we need no reminders about the ruin of Fallujah, the horror of Mosul, the danger in the Solomons, or the details of Amanda Vanstone's Christmas cleanup of Asylum Seekers.

There are many ways in which the force of life struggles to survive against the force of darkness in our world. But here we only mention the darkness to remember that it has been overcome, and we are invited to join in the miracle of contradicting it too. This involves no grand gestures. More likely the opposite because the light is a small and weak thing, and seems far outweighed by the darkness. The essence of the light is love:

not the love of romance novels, but the creative, active concern of one for others. It is love made visible that continues to reach out, even when the surrounding darkness is at its most oppressive.

This is what gives us hope and is the source of our deep joy today. This is the mainspring of our enlightenment, our inspiration for the year to come. But the best thing is this: it is given to us - not as a commercial transaction, but as pure gift, which flows from the sheer joy of loving. We are invited to embrace this fully, and live in this light. This is the basis for a Merry Christmas, for others too.