

Christmas Day
25/12/2007

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 52:7 - 10

Psalm 98

Hebrews 1:1 - 4

John 1:1 - 14

God lived amongst us: a fragment from amongst the rubble

In the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York visitors can see a fragile but luminous set of carved ivories. They once belonged in an ancient city. As a horde of attackers approached that place someone hid these ivories in a well. Nothing remains of the city, its inhabitants or its conquerors. But these ivories, beautiful, luminous, mysterious fragments discovered amongst the rubble of a crushed civilization, remain as a sign of something much greater, something living and rich.

On Christmas Day there is a sense in which we encounter something like those ivories. We gather to reflect upon and celebrate cherished fragments of a greater, beautiful story. A small piece of something shrouded in mystery, and yet lit by an inner light that attracts us still.

There is an irony in the fact that the key feasts of the Christian Church, Christmas and Easter, are based on two of most difficult things to explain: the Incarnation and the Resurrection. We are not here to explain them, but they are both part of a structure of memory, that gives shape to our gatherings, and forms the factual contours of the faith of the church. It is impossible to avoid competing claims over the memory of these facts. But we do not ignore them. Rather, they help us to renew contact with our identity, and to remember with greater clarity and truthfulness. And if we are worried about these being facts of the faith, in reality there is no knowledge, in science, theology or anything else, without a basis in some form of belief. There is always a point at which we are called us to trust in what lies beyond the known. In the case of the Incarnation the strength of the memory testifies that something important affected people here. What did the ancient people want us to know when they passed on these intricate memories?

If you have ever done family history, or written biography, you will know that a good place to start is with what became of the person, often best summed up in the obituary. The Gospels came into being after Jesus' death and Resurrection. From that perspective his followers began to use extravagant language about him, partly because of his ideas, but mostly because what he did and what became of him revealed something crucial. His life and death made a difference to the human landscape and brought into being a community that sought to live according to new premises. From the perspective of the end, the four Evangelists were at pains to show how, even in infancy Jesus was a child of the Spirit, whose life provided new insights into the nature and intentions of the unseen God.

Of the four Evangelists John's picture is the most exalted. *The Word became flesh and lived amongst us, and in him was life, and that life was the light of all people.* In

terms that resonate with the Creation story John declares that, from the beginning, the Word: the living, creative energy that is God streamed out towards us and was embodied in a life. John says that everything he stood for spoke to us of the unseen God. There was an intrinsic connection between his life and the life of all. Ironically, such exalted origins did not set Jesus apart from us as a superior, extra-worldly being. Rather he identified with us fully as was shown by his humble birth, the experience of fleeing to Egypt, his life of teaching and mixing with sinners, and above all his death. He shared all our vulnerability and insecurity. And what God poured into him he lovingly and faithfully gave back to God. Two thousand years ago this knowledge caused an eruption of the deepest joy because in him selfless love had come to greet us, and offer us the gift of a relationship in which we may thrive, and know lasting joy.

The intricately carved stories of the Incarnation offer us a memory that translates into way of reading life. It is difficult to understand. The early Christians took three and a half centuries to find words for this that did not completely break down. They hammered out what we sang in our first Hymn: *True God of true God, Light of light eternal, Son of the Father, begotten, not created*. Their aim was to ensure that, through the ages it would be remembered how God's promises to us were *fully embodied* in this life.

The bodily aspect of this is actually important. Through a life like ours it becomes possible to read who God is and what God wants. Above all, it changes how we approach life together as humans. If the unseen God took flesh and lived amongst us then every human being is a sister or brother of the Human One. That sounds simple, but it translates into meaning that from God's point of view, there are no outsiders. In Israel and Palestine: no outsiders. In the remote communities of Australia: no outsiders. In leaky boats on the high seas off our shores: no outsiders. For the policy makers in Canberra: no outsiders. In the Christian Church: no outsiders. The family of the Word-become-flesh includes the whole world of humanity. We are not only joined by one blood, we are joined by divine life and to hurt or destroy, or refuse care to one another, is to refuse God. The memory that the unseen God is embodied here becomes decisive. That is why gentleness and peace, and efforts towards human development are expected to flow from the new community that arose with Jesus. It was no accident the early church cared for the least, and built alms houses and hospitals. And it becomes clear why still the followers of Jesus commit to enduring social and political actions concerned with reconciliation, justice, peace and the protection of life.

Western Culture has many questions about the content and believability of this story. And because it seems to have become so far divorced from its real meaning, Richard Dawkins has declared Christmas safe for atheists. In the midst of its trivialization and commercialisation, Christmas is at heart a celebration of God who *lived amongst us*. Its deeper meaning may be harder to glimpse than it was, but we can take more comfort than we do in knowing that the ancient people found here a basis for deep joy, and the foundation for a new vision of life. This fragment, which they left as a gift to us shines with the light of self-giving love: a light that gives life to all. At Christmas there is no more precious gift we may have to share. This is the reason for a hope in which we may live and thrive. A cause for ineffable joy, the basis for a truly Merry Christmas: thanks be to God.

