

Christmas 1
30/12/ 2007

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 63:7-9
Psalm 149
Hebrews 2:10-18
Matthew 2:13-23

The light that enlightens the darkness casts a shadow

At the height of the season, while our hearts still sing of Peace and Goodwill, the reading of the flight into Egypt and the murdering of the Innocents is a tough call. The flight into Egypt may make it onto Christmas cards, but Herod's threat and the following story certainly do not. Yet the two belong together, and are part of the Good News of this season.

Part of the resistance we have to this story may be that even for us Christmas is a mixture of peace and goodwill, and death and violence. Since a few days before Christmas the first news item has so often been an update on the road toll and other disasters. And as we witness the turbulence of political life in Pakistan following Benazir Bhutto's assassination it is not difficult to connect with Herod's response to reports of a contender for his power. The state of our world is not unlike the one into which Jesus was born. The Christ we hail as a babe is not someone who only seems human, or some sort of super human who remains untouched by the normal troubles of the world. He comes to our world, and eventually its pernicious ways make an end of him.

How does Herod's story help us with our faith? During *Faith with Understanding* this year we heard of Ludwig Feuerbach, a 19th C philosopher who wrote a book called *The Essence of Christianity* in which he proposed the idea that God is only humanity's projected self image. In Feuerbach's understanding, God is not the Creator. Rather, humanity created God. Everything that humans wished for, or found missing in life, was projected onto an idealised understanding of God.

As you can imagine, this sort of view hardly made Feuerbach popular with believing Christians and some regarded him as the enemy of the Church. Feuerbach's book is still readily available and is often printed with an introductory essay by Karl Barth, one of the 20th C's most influential Christian theologians. Barth took the opposite view and proposed that God is wholly other and radically different from all that is human, and yet is to be found amongst us in Jesus Christ. Why did Barth allow himself to be linked with someone of such opposite view?

Karl Barth first developed his ideas in 1926 when Fascism was on the rise in Europe, when opposing views were not tolerated and books were burned. Barth said: **the faith that burns the books of the unbelievers, confesses unbelief in its own God.** And this is true whether the faith is in Christianity, democracy, socialism, or any other creed. For Barth, as a Christian theologian, **the refusal to hear the opponent would be a denial of the primacy and sovereignty of God.**

There is something here to consider in connection with the story of Herod and the children of Bethlehem. Everything Matthew said of Herod is consistent with the picture we have of him as a killer. He murdered three of his own sons, his wife and his mother in law. He was not open to the free play of the historical process. He wanted ultimate power for himself and had to silence or eliminate any challenge to his authority. For this reason news of a potential rival ignited his fear and paranoia. The god of Herod's own quest for power and prestige was sorely threatened and he responded with treachery, false piety, and then the final totalitarian solution applied regardless of guilt or innocence. Is this a sign of strength, or of profound weakness? Sadly, what Herod does is an archetype for how the powers of this world respond to news that there is a Prince of Peace whose sovereignty reaches beyond all that we know, who seeks to inaugurate a regime in which all may thrive and live justly, with one another. Ironically it is the coming of this light that evokes the darkest shadow. We must see this, just as we must see that the story does not end there. This is the light that overcomes the darkness.

The Murdering of The Innocents and the Flight into Egypt is rich in symbolism linked with the saga of the Exodus, which moves from hospitality to enslavement, and then to a gracious lifting up of the people into new life. In Matthew there are parallels with what Exodus says about the preservation of Moses' life and his leadership of the people from Egypt, and the original Joseph whose dreams and gift for interpreting them enabled him to find safe haven for his people. The theological point is: in Jesus Israel relives its past, he is the second Moses, and in him we are given a new act of Divine, saving, creativity which comes about despite, and over against, the ungodly machinations of temporal power.

Matthew and the prophets speak to us from amongst the bitter tragedies of history. Even Isaiah's positive words come from the middle of a lament. Yet their concern is to show that against the pain and suffering and the death dealing ways of power, God's concern for us did not cease. In the middle of dark days they were still able to dream dreams of life, and leave clues to help us. True and enduring power is not found in the quest for personal glory but in the tenderness, which lovingly protects, enfolds, and preserves life for a new beginning. And yet we must always remember the dark truth that, in its quest to secure life for itself human power will resist this way to life. It will seek its own ends, regardless of innocent victims. And in doing so, human power will ultimately be resisting God.

It is our custom in this Church to ritualise the lighting of the Paschal Candle on Christmas day. There is a point to this. The light that represents the fulfilment of the light of the four Advent candles is not something pristine and separated from the point where this story ends. In fact, it comes from the end of the story, which ironically is really the beginning. New life arose with Christ's entering fully into the darkness of suffering and death at Easter, his Passover. In this God identified fully with all the perniciousness that goes with being human. God did not do this for Angels. God did this for us, so that we might find another way to life, one that leads beyond self-focus to something more. The Paschal candle is a sign there is another way. This is the light that overcomes the darkness. And yet it also remains a sign of what humans actually felt and feel about God.

The challenge is to take to heart the message of this light and apply what we see to the

expression power in the world. We need no reminding of what the world is like. As David Hicks is released from gaol to hide, we might ponder, not his guilt or innocence, but the meaning of Guantanamo. But as we face the year of our Lord 2008, which way will we take for our future? Will it be by finding a thousand ways to take the life of all critics and opponents and extinguish their light? Or will the future be found amongst those who discover in these narratives the resources to be open to the grace that is always striving to lift us up; who continue to trust the dreams of life that are given to them, and act on their message for the good of all, despite the threats, and news of intolerable suffering and destruction.