

Christmas Day
25/12/2013

Mark the Evangelist

John 1:1-14
Psalm 98

God has our measure

“It is said” that when the designers of the US space shuttles came to considering the dimensions of the solid rocket boosters which were attached to the sides of shuttles, one of the limiting factors was a tunnel along the train line which had to be used to transport the boosters from the place of manufacture to the launch site in Florida. This tunnel is particularly narrow, being only slightly wider than the width between the train tracks themselves, only just accommodating a train. The width between all main gauge train rails in the US is 4 feet, 8.5 inches.

Now, if you were to design a train line from scratch, you would almost certainly not propose 4 feet 8½ inches as the width between the rails, just as you would be unlikely to settle for 5 feet 2¾ inches. Were there nothing else to constrain us, we would usually choose a nice round number – 5 feet, or 6 feet, or 2 meters, or 1.5 meters, or whatever.

But it is very rare that anything is thought or designed from scratch. The reason the rails in the US are 4 feet 8½ inches apart is that the first trains were mainly built by expatriate English tram builders, who based their measurements on the tramway gauge in England, which also set the tracks at 4 feet 8½ inches apart. This distance had become the standard axle length for the tramways because it was the standard length of the axles on horse-drawn buggies and carriages in England. These carriages were built to such dimensions because the dirt back roads of England were built and used extensively by the Romans, who also used a standard axle length, and so cut deep grooves corresponding to that length into the dirt roads. The effect of these grooves was to force the same axle length on subsequent carriages because, if they didn't have the same axle length, the wheels and axles would break against the sides of the grooves left by the earlier Roman chariots. The Roman chariot axle length was determined by a simple and obvious factor – the distance required to fit two horses and their harnesses to the front to pull the thing along.

Now, the point of relating all of this is simply to draw attention to a surprising thing: that the design of the rockets on perhaps the most advanced transportation vehicle the world has ever known was constrained by the distance between the wheels of a Roman chariot, which was approximately equal to twice the width of a horse's backside!

Now, that account is almost certainly not true, but this is one of those instances where the truth should not be allowed to get in the way of a good story. Even if, in fact, the relationship between chariots and space shuttles is a little less straightforward than what I've reported, we still get the point: where we are now is something which arises out of where we have come from.

When we turn to the gospel writers of the New Testament, we see that each speaks of his own particular “now” – his own experience of Jesus – in terms of a particular starting place. From this distance we can't know exactly the order in which the gospel writers arrived at their final drafts, but it's fairly widely accepted that Mark wrote

first, that Luke and Matthew came next, using Mark's work as a basic template, and that John was the last to write, rather independently of the others.

A quick look at the start of each of their gospels reveals that they begin in very different places. Mark begins at the first public appearance of the mature Jesus, on the banks of the Jordan as John the Baptist announces his impending arrival and calls the people to repentance. The Christmas story as we know it is irrelevant to what Mark wants to say about where what has happened began. It was enough for Mark – even *necessary* for him – that the man Jesus simply appeared on the scene.

Matthew has parts of our familiar Christmas story, as does Luke, but these two begin not there but with genealogies of Jesus. In the case of Matthew, the story begins with the Jewish patriarch Abraham, probably reflecting his particular interest in portraying Jesus as standing firmly in series with previous experiences of Israel. In the case of Luke, the story begins not with the Jews among the many peoples, but with Adam, the progenitor of all peoples. This probably reflects his interest in portraying Jesus not simply as of and for the Jews but as one with a humanity in common with all, and so potentially embracing of all – Jew and Gentile alike.

John, the last in the sequence of gospel writers, pushes the beginning back even further. For him it all starts not merely with Adam and Eve, but “in the beginning”. Jesus is not simply a man who appears in time but, in the words of the reading we've heard this morning,

“He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.”

Now, the point here is simply to see what the gospel writers are doing. In a sense, when they give their accounts of the origins of the things they have experienced in Jesus, they are coming to terms with those 4 feet and 8.5 inches they've received about *themselves*: what must once have been the case, for us to do or see or know what we now do, see and know? What is the beginning which makes sense of this present (this present being what they've experienced in Jesus)?

We stand in a different place from the gospel writers. Whereas they have reflected on what they've known of Jesus and come to their various conclusions about where it must have begun, we tend to approach Christmas, and indeed the whole of a belief system like Christian faith, by recalling *their* experiences, and not expecting or desiring or looking for our own. And so our celebration of Christmas runs the risk of taking delivery of 4 feet, 8.5 inches *of God*, and being invited to structure ourselves around that limitation as if, having once been set in place by those who have gone before us, the things of God will always be as they once were.

Usually, with such things, it is easier to put up with the inconvenience than it is to do the extraordinary amount of work it would take to reconceive the design. Christmas with its stories and carols and traditions, and indeed the whole of delivered Christian belief can tempt us into just such thinking. Even if it is all a bit hard to swallow, we can still hold our nose and gulp down really hard.

But, of course, there is another option which applies to belief systems such as Christian faith: we can simply choose to be done with the odd dimensions altogether; why be bound by the limitation of iron rails laid long ago when we could simply fly?

The possibility of such flight – the possibility of saving Christmas for believers and non-believers alike – is in discovering that Christmas does not simply live in our past, but that there is a future which lives in Christmas. While our past has created us, and it might be interesting to know our own history, it is the future which really engages us for it is the future which is uncertain and never ours fully to control. It is the future which requires of us “small, unsteady steps” in the dark, with prayers for a “touch of certainty” (Joyce Lee, *Bountiful Years*, p40; read earlier in the service).

And, in fact, as the gospel writers delve back into Jesus’ origins, it is in order to understand the source not only of their present but also of their future. To stay with John: to identify Jesus as the originating word, the founding thought of all things, is to speak a truth not only about God but about our world. If this Word can become flesh – our flesh – and be both truly world and truly God in the same time and place, then anything is possible. Or, more to the point, something truly *new* is possible – then, and now, and tomorrow.

Whether we act to affect them or not, we all have futures before us. The question which matters is whether that future will be something truly new and enlivening, or simply more of the same: it looks like a space shuttle, but if you look closely enough it’s really just a variation on a theme by two Roman horses. It looks like a better policy, a new hope, a true revolution, a miracle cure...but it’s really what we already had, re-worked, polished up, or re-heated.

The truly new is a very rare thing.

One last illustration to make the point. In the last 20 years or so it’s become common to sing or play at this time of the year the song “When a child is born” (author unknown):

A ray of hope flickers in the sky
A tiny star lights up way up high
All across the land dawns a brand new morn
This comes to pass when a child is born

A silent wish sails the seven seas
The winds of change whisper in the trees
And the walls of doubt crumble tossed and torn
This comes to pass, when a child is born

A rosy hue settles all around
You’ve got to feel, you’re on solid ground
For a spell or two no one seems forlorn
This comes to pass, when a child is born

*Spoken: And all of this happens, because the world is waiting.
Waiting for one child; Black-white-yellow, no one knows...
but a child that will grow up and turn tears to laughter,
hate to love, war to peace and everyone to everyone's neighbour,
and misery and suffering will be words to be forgotten forever.*

It's all a dream and illusion now,
It must come true sometime soon somehow,
All across the land dawns a brand new morn,
This comes to pass when a child is born.

I risk coming across here as a little more cynical than even I want to be(!), for we all resonate with the *desire* for such a wishful hope to be true. But we must also note the refusal to take ourselves and our situation seriously in what is expressed in this song.

“When a child is born” sounds very Christmassy and Christian, yet it is about as far from “the Christmas message” as one could get. Even if we might indeed hope for a bit more of God, we are stuck with ourselves, oddly and irredeemably 4 feet 8.5 inches. Extraordinary things that they are, to mistake our children as our hope, knowing full well they will end up pretty much as we are, is to live in delusion. And merely to assert sentimentally that somewhere, somehow, a child will arrive on the scene with the ability to set all things right is to set forth a great plot for a fantasy TV series, but just as filled with fantasy as the TV story would be.

True hope for those who are caught in cycles of hopelessness – for those who can never quite free themselves from the ties of their past – doesn’t spring from within, from what we can bring forth from ourselves, but from without. John’s proposal – that one has “come into the world” from beyond, and yet been one of us that we might receive him and ourselves become God’s children – this is a thought which is different, and worthy of reflection.

This thought is that God takes the world seriously in all its fleshly ups and downs, in all its odd, deformed and corrupted dimensions and still is able to make good of us. This thought is a Word which sets forth the possibility of new beginnings, the start of a new world created for us and in us, a new source of life which becomes light for us and for all.

Our world is irredeemably a strange 4 feet 8½ inches; it is too hard to round ourselves up to something more sensible. Yet it is the message of Christmas that, however oddly we may measure up, God has that measure, and in Jesus comes to trim and fit us for the things of heaven. The *birth* of Jesus is the sharpening of the tools for this task in the setting forth of a perfected and perfecting human being – a light which shines in the darkness.

By the grace of God, may we all see ourselves a little more clearly in that light this Christmas, and be willing to let God re-shape us a little more closely to the image of his life-giving Son, to our greater benefit, and his greater glory. Amen.
