

Christmas Day  
25/12/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Hebrews 1:1-4, 5-12  
Psalm 98  
John 1:1-14

### Christmas against Christmas

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With Christmas comes, without fail, the poignant reflection piece of the newspaper columnist.

The first I read this year was by Amanda Vanstone. It was a disappointment and the others didn't improve much from there. But then what else *could* these pieces be if indeed there is any truth in what the church confesses about the baby in the manger? For we confess that everything we desire is given *there*. It is scarcely believable, but nonetheless it is the point of being in church on a Monday. So if, with Vanstone, most of the rest of the world, *and* most of the church most of the time – if, with all, we turn away from that gift, we must then find something to *give ourselves*. What that self-gift might be is precisely the subject of the Christmas reflection piece: the discovery, the *revelation*, of the stillpoint in the chaos. If the church is hypocritical and irrelevant, if family traditions are too burdensome or evaporating before our eyes, if gift-giving is corrupted by materialistic commercialism, if death looms to overshadow our celebrations, then how desperate we become for the one thing which will transcend all of this. Where is the infinite thing, beyond the failure of our best efforts, our ideals and our dreams, which will meet our yearning for something solid and reliable and enduring? It will not be found in average newspaper Christmas reflections. These, like all exclusively human endeavours, merely propose more that we can do for a better experience of the world. And they imagine that, for the first time in history, this new utopia will not sink beneath the waves of moral failure, our failure to *do*. The poignancy of such reflections at Christmas (or any) time is in their necessity – for they speak a truth – and in their hopelessness, for they cannot realise any further truth.

As a way towards the answer of Christmas to all our disappointment with Christmas, a reading from the Danish thinker, Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard's concern here is what a believer looks like; this believer he names "the knight of faith," in the sense of "champion of faith." What features distinguish her from anyone else? How does the "heavenly" manifest in the way he conducts himself in the world? How does the longed-for infinite occur in the desperately finite?

"I candidly admit that in my experience I have not found any reliable example of the knight of faith... People commonly travel around the world to see rivers and mountains, new stars, birds of rare plumage, queerly deformed fishes, ridiculous breeds of men ... and they think they have seen something. This does not interest me. But if I knew where there was such a knight of faith, I would make a pilgrimage to him on foot, for this prodigy interests me absolutely...

"As I've said, I have not found any such person, but I can well think him. Here he is. Acquaintance made, I am introduced to him. The moment I set eyes on him I instantly push him from me, I myself leap backwards, I clasp my hands and say half aloud, "Good Lord, is *this* the man? Is it *really* he? Why, he looks like a tax-collector!" However, it is the man after all. I draw closer to him, watching his least movements to see whether he shows any sign of the least

telegraphic message from the infinite, a glance, a look, a gesture, a note of sadness, a smile, which betrays the infinite in its contrast with the finite. No! I examine his figure from tip to toe to see if there might not be a cranny through which the infinite was peeping. No! He is solid through and through.

“One can discover *nothing* of [an] aloof and superior nature ... He takes delight in everything, and whenever one sees him taking part in a particular pleasure, he does it with the persistence which is the mark of the earthly man whose soul is absorbed in such things. He tends to his work... He takes a holiday on Sunday. He goes to church... In the afternoon he walks to the forest. He takes delight in everything he sees...

“Toward evening he walks home, his gait is as strident as that of the postman. On his way he reflects that his wife has surely a special little warm dish prepared for him... Actually, she hasn’t, but strangely enough, it is quite the same to him.

“...he is interested in everything that goes on, in a rat which slips under the curb, in the children’s play, and this with the nonchalance of a girl of sixteen. And yet he is no genius, for in vain I have sought in him the incommensurability of genius. In the evening he smokes his pipe; to look at him one would swear that it was the grocer over the way vegetating in the twilight...

“And yet, and yet—actually I could become furious over it, for envy if for no other reason—this man has made and every instant is making the movements of infinity. ...he has drained the cup of life’s profound sadness, he knows the bliss of the infinite, he senses the pain of renouncing everything, the dearest things he possesses in the world, and yet finiteness tastes to him just as good as to one who never knew anything higher, ... as though the finite life were the surest thing of all.

“...He constantly makes the movements of infinity, but he does this with such correctness and assurance that he constantly gets the finite out of it, *and there is not one moment when one has a notion of anything else.*

“It is supposed to be the most difficult task for a dancer to leap into a definite posture in such a way that there is not a second when he is grasping after the posture, but by the leap itself he stands fixed in that posture. Perhaps no dancer can do it—that is what this knight does.

“...to be able to fall down in such a way that the same second it looks as if one were standing and walking, to transform the leap of life into a walk, absolutely to express the sublime in the pedestrian—that only the knight of faith can do—and this is the one and only miracle.<sup>1</sup>

Kierkegaard points us to a humanity which lives the freedom of the eternal and yet looks just like an ordinary piece of the world: the one and only miracle. But as a *miracle*, it is beyond us. This is the pathos of all exhortations to do better at Christmas time, or any time: only a miracle will do, and we are not miracle workers.

Yet this is precisely the miracle of Christmas.

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<sup>1</sup> Largely drawn from the translation of Walter Lowrie (Kierkegaard’s *Fear and Trembling*, Doubleday 1954, p49ff), although emphases added and language “adjusted” for a modern ear, with some guidance from Robert Payne’s OUP translation (pp.48ff).

The church has long spoken of the “incarnation” of God in Jesus, imagining for the most part that there would have been something about him indicating that he was different – Kierkegaard’s cranny through which the infinite peeps. Even the Scriptures do this in their Christmas narratives, trimming the story with glimpses of heaven: a virginal conception, choirs of angels and a star of wonder with royal beauty bright.

Yet to say Jesus was human is to say, with Kierkegaard, that he was solid though and through, that he was in every respect like us – unremarkable *but* for the way in which he met God and God met him. This meeting was the play of the finite and limited with the infinite and unbounded such as Kierkegaard describes. What we’ve come to call the “divinity” of Jesus was evident only in his extraordinary humanity, which was his extraordinary meeting of God – for what meeting God does is cause the world to be itself. Our poignant Christmas reflections spring from the experience that we are not ourselves, and exhort us to perform the miracle of creating ourselves.

But for us to be ourselves is for us to be *relieved* of the burden of performing miracles, relieved of the requirement that we make real for ourselves the sublime in the midst of the mundane, relieved of the demand that we cause the infinite to be visible through some cranny.

This is incarnation, and sacrament. This is Christmas against Christmas: gift against our tired exchanges, grace against hard-earned favour, aid against wearing demand; the infinite *in* the finite, dwelling among us and us invited to dwell in it.

In the beginning was the Word, John writes.

In him was life, and the life was light.

The Word became Flesh. And we have seen his glory: the glory of a human being fully alive.

Would this not be everything we need? Do we not long to be our very selves, and yet to be located in, connected to, part of the *whole* – the *more* than us – but not overwhelmed by it?

Christmas marks just such a humanity as the gift of God in Jesus, whether under a crown, on a cross or in a cradle, whether with sceptre, under scourge or in a stable (TIS 321): the miracle of a leap of life expressed in a mere walk, the sublime in its natural habitat: our *ordinary*.

Christmas would give us heaven because it would give us the world, each without poignant loss.

Now, and in the year about to begin, let’s take them both.

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