

Christmas Day  
25/12/2018

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 62:6-12  
Psalm 97  
Luke 2:8-20

### Extraordinary Ordinary

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The shepherds say to one another: 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing.' As their journey was a response news of an extraordinary thing, so also is our gathering here this morning.

And yet, if we give it more than a moment's thought, it is less clear than we might assume just how the birth of Jesus *is* extraordinary, for the extraordinary is *elusive*.

We encounter many extraordinary things in the world: the 10 year old musical prodigy, the resolution of the latest smart phone camera, Brexit, the terrorist's bomb, 5 prime ministers in eight years (not necessarily in increasing order of extraordinariness!).

Yet, what we call extraordinary is typically something indeed out of the ordinary but on its way to being forgotten or to becoming ordinary. There are two things typical of such occurrences.

First, the extraordinary is typically *distracting*. Violence, political upheaval, talent and beauty cause us to turn aside from what normally commands our attention.

The second thing about the extraordinary is that it is typically *fleeting*. Either it recedes into the past – *becoming a mere memory* – or, perhaps more commonly, it remains with us and becomes the *new* ordinary. Terrorism is extraordinary, until we grow used to walking around the concrete blocks intended to keep weaponised trucks away from crowds. So also for the decay of political stability, the presence of the precocious talent or the ever-improving capacity of modern gadgets. If there *is* anything new under the sun, it is not new for long.

These two characteristics might permit us to speak, then, of an '*ordinary* extraordinary' – the extraordinary as it ordinarily works.

It's a bit of a mind-bend to try to think the ordinary extraordinary but the point here is that if this *is* how it works – *if the glory always fades* – then we do better *not* to speak of Christmas as something 'extraordinary.' Or, at least, 'extraordinary', or 'special' or 'exceptional', are less impressive characterisations of Christmas than we might imagine.

The heaviness and difficulties which seem to overlay our cultural experience of Christmas arise from the attempt to hold onto the fleeting extraordinary, to drag it from its receding past, and to retain it by locking it as an ever-returning calendar event. Thus we make the extraordinary into the ordinary, and empty it of anything which could make a difference.

What, then, breaks through the ordinary? The answer is twofold: first, nothing breaks through the ordinary and, second, God does. This is not to say that God and nothing are the same; it is to say that *the ordinary is what God finally aims at*. God does not break *through* the ordinary but rather *embraces* it.

We are generally not very impressed by the normal, although this is scarcely new. When Luke wants to give substance to the birth in Bethlehem he does not just *say* what has happened; he has a lead angel with a heaven-wide backing choir make the point to the shepherds. This is impressive – extraordinary – but what then do the shepherds expect to see when they get to the stable?

I found myself recalling during the week the opening scene of Monty Python's *Life of Brian*. Some of you have probably not seen this film for the sake of piety, though others of you would likely say that it was for piety's sake that you *have* seen it (even numerous times!).

But for information, or as a reminder: the film begins with a night sky, across which travels the Star of Bethlehem. On the horizon we see the Magi (the three kings 'of orient are'), whom we follow through the streets of Bethlehem to a stable where they find and kneel to worship a child in a manger and present their gifts to the child's mother. (In all this the film mixes up the biblical story but the whole thing is *Christmas-card* correct). They then take their leave but very soon return and snatch back the gifts, for they have seen down the street another stable – but now one glowing with heavenly light – and they realise that they've visited the wrong place.

We get the joke because we've seen the Christmas cards and the icons and the stained glass windows and the sentimental life-of-Jesus films with their halos and attending cherubs and angel-choir soundtracks. But the thing is – if the story is true – the wise men should not been able to tell the baby Brian and the baby Jesus apart. Certainly Brian's mother could scarcely be accused of being 'full of grace' but Mary is not the measure of Jesus in that way, either.

And so the shepherds, to whom the news of the birth of a saviour is extraordinarily *delivered*, trot off to see what any one of us sees in response to news of a birth – a baby. There is no heavenly light and no halo. Whatever a first century Palestinian nappy looked like, there were likely a couple of them waiting for service and we can rest assured that there is little truth in the suggestion that 'the little Lord Jesus, no crying he made'. It is just... so... ordinary.

And this ordinariness is perhaps the way we need to recast the representations of Christmas as 'extraordinary'. Halos and miracles make little impression in a sceptical and cynical age like ours. Ours is a blockbuster culture, which is to say that we have *tamed* the extraordinary. A choir of angels *would* still impress us, but we would finally turn it into a screen saver or a ring tone, and then hang out for the even more spectacular sequel.

And yet our hunger for the extraordinary, and our capacity to consume it in this way, leads us further and further from ourselves and the potential fullness of the lives given us to live. For we – most of us – are not extraordinary: our lives are not movie scripts, our decisions do not shift the course of history, our highest achievements will scarcely leave a mark. Our fascination with the extraordinary is an escape from who we are.

Yet this is the un-extraordinary normal into which Jesus is born, the ordinary he takes on. It is this normality which causes such great offence when he begins to wax larger in the religious awareness of those around him. 'Who is this? Where did he get this from? Is he not one of the local boys?' More profoundly, the question here is, How can the things of God be so ordinary?

If our usual experience is with an '*ordinary* extraordinary' which eventually recedes or becomes a new ordinary, in Jesus we see the reverse: an extraordinary ordinary.

Jesus' achievement is just to be a first century Palestinian Jew, an achievement which begins with his being a first century Palestinian Jewish baby. This is the '*ordinary*'.

The '*extraordinary*' is that he does this ordinariness in such a way that God intersects via that very humanity. The ordinariness of Jesus is not something which leads him away from God, but the way in which he meets God and God meets him.

The glory of God in the story of Christmas is not in the distracting angels or halos. The glory of God is the living human being at its centre, an '*ordinary*' which will be extraordinarily done.

his extraordinary ordinary is the gift of Christmas, and its invitation.

The *gift* is a human life in which the limitations of a particular space, time, culture, language, gender and social status become not *mere* limitations but the outer form of one person's freedom to be a child of God.

The *invitation* is to take this extraordinary life ordinary as our own, to have in ourselves the mind of Jesus: to be free of the need to gild the lily which each one of us is, free of the need to grasp after a glory which seems brighter than us.

For what we are is enough to be magnificent, if we receive it from God not as a burden to be overcome but as a gift to be unwrapped and lived.

Every ordinary baby is a promise of great things: the promise of Godly things in human things – the promise of the glory of God. What is extraordinary about the baby in the manger is that the promise which every ordinary baby is is actually *kept* in his case: here is a human being fully alive, and so the very glory of God.

This is the gift of Christmas, and its invitation.

Let us, then, with the shepherds, 'go and see the thing which has taken place,' receive it as our own and, by the grace of God, begin to become it.

Amen.

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