

Christmas Day
25/12/2019

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 62:6-12

Psalm 97

Luke 2:8-20

Gift-ed

In a sentence

Christmas is about what it means to give, receive and be a gift

The comic musician Tom Lehrer has a song entitled 'A Christmas Carol', a cynical mishmash of re-worked Christmas favourites, part of which runs like this:

*Hark the Herald Tribune sings,
Advertising wondrous things.*

*God rest ye merry merchants, may
you make the yuletide pay.*

*Angels we have heard on high
Tell us to go out and buy!*

Something of that cynicism is probably shared by most of us at this time of the year. Christmas seems to have lost its way.

To that seasonal cynicism we could add a cultural *scepticism* at any attempt the Church makes to claw back some Christmas ground. God might have got the whole show going but is, surely, no longer necessary. Indeed, for many, Christmas will not bear its own story; whatever Christmas needs, it could not be God.

Whether cynical belief or sceptical unbelief, then, there is not enough Christmas in Christmas for any of us.

Yet what is, in fact, most missing is not 'the spirit of Christmas' at all – whether a divine or simply seasonal spirit. Rather, we ourselves are largely missing from Christmas. The season has an extraordinary capacity to *reduce* rather than expand us, to take more than it gives, to diminish our freedom.

This is an extraordinary thing, for Christmas is the season of the *gift*, and a gift is supposed to 'add' something to us. We might wonder, then, whether what we experience at Christmas time is the *corruption* of 'gift'.

We feel something of this corruption when we find ourselves in the awkward situation of having received a Christmas gift but having nothing to give in return, and feel compelled to apologise for the oversight or to make a recovery offering a little later.

It's telling that we don't usually feel this when the gift is given *outside* of the 'gifting season'. The unexpected gift in June or September is something we can receive without implied obligation, and is less likely to feel contrived. It springs not from a calendar trigger but from the free initiative of a person, and this touches us.

It is the *scheduled* gift which is the problem, and Christmas is scheduled giving *par excellence*. The thing about the scheduled gift is that it is not really a gift at all; it is half of an *exchange* springing from obligation. At its most crass, a scheduled 'gift' is

given in *payment* for a 'gift' received or anticipated. To exchange 'gifts' might sometimes have an important social function but it is not about 'gift' as such.

Christmas, then, as we experience it as a society and often enough as a church, promises gift but doesn't deliver; it delivers obligation. It is the tension between the language of gift and our experienced reality at this time which can make Christmas a burden or even, for some, literally quite crushing. The corruption of Christmas, then, is not commercialisation. Commercialisation reflects that gift has *already* been corrupted. The exchange economy of capitalism finds a comfortable home in a calendarised gifting season.

But let us notice something unexpected which now arises here. If the absence of true and free *gift* corresponds to our sense that we are *ourselves* absent from Christmas, we might wonder whether 'gift' is actually at the centre of what it means truly to be human. That is, if we got gift right we would get ourselves right.

For many years now I've made a habit on Christmas Eve of listening to a particularly beautiful rendition (Laurisden) of the Latin chant 'O magnum mysterium'. An English translation of the text might run:

*O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the new-born Lord,
lying in a manger!
Blessed is the Virgin whose womb
was worthy to bear
Christ the Lord.
Alleluia!*

The *magnum mysterium* – the 'great mystery' – is not some great *unknown*. It is the startling appearance of God in the world, out of season, unexpected. The trimmings to the magnum mysterium – a young woman ripe *before* season, watched by animals which cannot even *tell* the time – are fitting signs of what is at play here: pure gift, determined not by *scheduling* but by the *Giver*. And, so, this is a coming which – as any true gift does – takes place without expectation of reciprocation or exchange, because the 'time-ed' cannot respond in terms of the 'un-timed'. True gift is overwhelming and the only appropriate response is *thanksgiving*.

In the birth of Jesus there is no frustrating mismatch of promising season and failed gift, to give rise to cynicism. Cynicism in politics and relationships at every level arises from failure to deliver. And scepticism that such a thing could happen is shown to be deeply pessimistic about the possibility of any gift really being given by anyone – the denial of good in human being, with or without God. The sceptic sees only by the dim light which we ourselves generate.

And so the story admits neither cynicism nor scepticism, even if the cynic's disappointment and the sceptic's self-loathing determine that the story ends on a cross.

True gift arrives from outside the times and seasons, and changes them by virtue of being something startlingly new. And this is Christmas, rightly told. And it is *mystery*, a kind of resident contradiction in our midst, calling us to a new thought. For *we are* cynics and sceptics and, in a world like ours, the Christmas story can only be a quiet *rumour* of freedom, peace, joy, gift. The rumour calls into question what we take for

granted but is not quite true: that we are *free*, and able to give and receive true gifts – able to be truly and richly human.

For we are not free in this way, even in the season of the gift, the season of the free offering. And so the cynic and the sceptic are right, so far as they can be: our times and seasons are not working, and will not work.

To rumour a great mystery – a story of a true gift in a world which cannot properly give or receive – is to draw attention to unfreedom in our freedom-infatuated world. It is to say that the gift we are is to be found somewhere other than we are usually given to look.

But it is also to give impetus for us to do what Isaiah proposed this morning: to take up the rumour and to give God the true Giver no rest until we are freed from cynicism and scepticism, and experience ourselves as gift: liberated and liberating. For it is not that Christmas happened but that it *had* to happen, if we are to see the possibility of freedom, something only God could work:

the great mystery of beauty in the midst of unbeauty,
of freedom in the midst of unfreedom,
of gift where only exchange is known.

As this Christmas continues to unfold today and tomorrow and the next day, may some small measure of God's giving be discovered in what is happening around you, that you might be filled where you are empty, freed where you are unfree, and take up the rumour of the angels, in a quiet alleluia.

Amen.

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