

Christmas Day
25/12/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Luke 2:1-20

We're all in this together

In a sentence

*The defining 'this' which is the context of our lives is not what is now happening to us
but Jesus himself: we are all in him together*

In this most unexpected of years, we have worked up a full oratorio of choruses and chants around the theme of Covid-19. One of the most happily sung among these has been, 'We're all in this together'.

By this refrain we remind each other that a virus is indiscriminate, so that we can't tell who will be next. For it not to be *me* who is next, I have to act so that *you* are not next. 'We're all in this together' means that we must cooperate 'to get through it'. The good sense in this is obvious enough to most of us, and not particularly surprising.

Perhaps less obvious is that we don't *usually* tell ourselves, 'We are all in this together'. Most of the time, we are *not* 'in this together'; most of the time we don't recognise much we have in common 'to get through'. We are usually – at least on the larger social scale – not 'in this together' but rather competing against each other. We compete for university placements, for partners, for jobs, for parking spaces. Colonists compete with indigenous peoples. New refugees compete with old refugees. Cities compete with rural communities. Nations compete with nations. The poor compete with the slightly less poor. Not so long ago, competition was especially fierce around toilet paper, which was unexpectedly revealed to be one of the previously unrecognised cornerstones of modern society. The church, of course, is scarcely immune to this infection.

Competition is not quite everywhere, of course. There's a little less of it between friends and lovers and within the household, and we are sometimes startled by acts of kindness outside those safety zones. Yet, like our vulnerability to a virus, we are all also nevertheless continually subject to the struggle of all against all (Hobbes, *Leviathan*).

More insidiously than with a virus, however, we are not merely *subject* to competition; we also *participate* in it. A better strategy – or perhaps just the good fortune of having won more often before – sees me step up to bid the highest at the auction for my new home. Getting up earlier sees me at the front of the line on the Boxing Day sales, like gladiators who've trained hard to earn a longer sword or wider net. If I work harder, I might pick more bulls than bears, winning more from the losses of others.

Curiously, the virus has made the well-being of the usual winners dependent upon the well-being of the typical losers. Universal cooperation has displaced competition for a while. But competition again lurks around the corner: Who has the *best* vaccine? And who will pay for it? Who should get it first? And is it, perhaps, best, if others have it first, 'just in case'? Calculation and strategy in the game of life, all oriented towards not losing.

Outside of the immediate space of Covid-19 and similar 'war footings', we are not much 'in this together' because, in a world of winners and losers, what you are 'in' can be very different from what I am 'in'. The only thing we are really in together is the competition itself and those social, political and legal conventions which legitimate how society operates and so are powerless to alter it.

If this account sounds rather pessimistic, it matters today in this place because our *not* being 'all in this together' is scarcely new. While, in some respects, Augustus, Quirinius, Joseph and Mary, and Rome, Syria, and Bethlehem are thousand of years and miles away, we still recognise many aspects of their stories. An imperial census is an emperor in competition with his people. To hear that 'there was no room in the inn' is to know that Joseph and Mary were in that race but lost. There is nothing new under the sun.

In the midst of all that is 'the child', strangely anonymous among the names of other persons and places around him. We have learned what his name will be (1.31) but he is yet to receive it (2.21). All around this child, of course, swirls the language of salvation but this also is strange to us today, for what is it from which we would be saved – from which we would *all* be saved? Do winners need to be saved? To have won is to imagine that God's kingdom has already come. If around this child there were a *universally* relevant message of salvation, it would offer salvation from something to which we are *all* subject. The virus is an obvious candidate but we don't need a god to do what will probably happen with time anyway.

A more likely thing from which we might be saved at Christmas is the struggle of all against all which creates winners and losers. Salvation is salvation from such things as this. It is not that competition does not touch Jesus. The religious authorities see in him a serious opponent. The poor jostle for access to his healing hand and his disciples calculate for positions of honour in his kingdom or for time to sit at his feet. His family competes with the crowds for his attention. Even on the cross, those with whom he is crucified compete for his attention.

Yet, for all of this, Jesus is himself no competitor. His success does not hinge on another's failure. He is 'in this together' with us, but does not contribute to the struggle even as he is subject to it. Of itself, this might be a remarkable moral achievement but the morality is not the point. It is good for Jesus if he has lived fully without taking advantage of others but bad for us if we are, therefore, to achieve the same.

We sometimes speak about the ‘God with us’ of Christmas in this way – as if God comes to show us the way, and we are to follow. This is a *little* better than the account of a God who comes among us as a kind of comforter, more or less to suffer with us, but not much better. Certainly, salvation is not something more for us to *do*.

We get to something more helpful if we take up again the Covid chorus, ‘We’re all in this together’ but sing it now with a very different meaning. Now the ‘this’ is not some passing condition like the health crisis or the next ‘affects everybody’ moment but *Jesus himself*: ‘we are all in this – this *one* – together.

Jesus is now not an answer to whatever question we happen at the moment to think is the most important. Rather, Jesus now poses a question about our fundamental situation: What *is* the context which *truly* defines us? What is our true condition?

The answer of Christmas – of the gospel itself – is that we are most ‘in’ Jesus himself, and not this or that passing experience, however pressing, painful or exciting it may be. It often does not feel this way. Pain and excitement are highly distracting. In each case, we mistake what hurts us or excites us as *immediate* – as direct, as sheer us-and-it.

But if our true context is not what is happening in front of us but all these things *in God-in-Jesus*, then he becomes something like an underlying harmony to everything which happens. Those we love – and sometimes lose – are not ‘immediately’ ours, not ‘directly’ ours. They are mediated by Christ, they are ‘in’ Christ, just as we are. If this is true, they are never solely ours because they belonged first to Jesus, and they are never lost to us because they remain in him, as we do.

It is so with all things. Jesus is given as the theme which threads through and holds together every key, every melody and discord. ‘We are all in this together’ locates us not in some particular time or place, some particular condition or crisis. The ‘this’ is Jesus himself: we are all in *this one* together.

This is to say that what happens to *him* is what happens to *us*. What happens to Jesus is God himself – ever calling, ever-present, ever restoring. Christmas is not so much a divine rescue mission as a radical clarification of who and where we are: children of God in Jesus, from God and towards God.

To believe this is to be freed from the drive to compete for as much life as we can win. And it is to be opened up to one another and to God, in *all* things, in thanksgiving and praise.

May such openness and praise be ours today, and always.
