

Christmas Day
25/12/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 52:7 – 10
Psalm 98
Hebrews 1:1 - 4
John 1:1 – 14

A greater love: the disclosure of God

Being in church on Christmas day is a bit like attending a symphony concert. The score is set but when we go home we take with us something that only exists because it was played. We hear music and sing songs connected with this season that are familiar and yet are different because of the context and the day. Classical texts proclaim lofty sentiments. In some ways we just want to hear the rhythm of their words again. Through all this perhaps we are hoping to be touched once more by the message that resonates with who we are - people seeking something deeper, something that will enable us to live life-giving and enlightened lives in the world.

Everything in the “score” for Christmas day explicates a message found again and again in Scripture. The texts begin by directing us towards a movement that has taken place in history, in which a deeper reality is disclosed. *How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace* [Isa 52:7]. Isaiah spoke words of comfort to a people who had endured long years of exile involving alienation, abandonment and yearning for a change of circumstances. The dusty feet of the messenger brought news of an event that was visible to all. A change in the political landscape was taking place that heralded a beautiful thing: the time of trial was ending. To the eyes of people of faith this translated into knowing that God was at work. The stress of exile would give way to freedom, a derelict city would be repaired, worship would start afresh and faith would be rebuilt.

All who have made long journeys into freedom know what it means to yearn for the emergence of a deep change. Prisoners, refugees, oppressed peoples the spiritually starved and alienated: all know the release that comes born of knowing their time of trial is over.

In the Christian tradition the prophetic announcement that God moves in history to create freedom and life for us has been firmly connected to the birth we celebrate this morning. And yet if we look carefully at Hebrews and John we find neither of them contains a nativity scene. In our time people have searched earnestly for the facts of Jesus’ birth and life and death. But although the New Testament writers, like the ones we heard today, did write truthfully and faithfully about Jesus, they don’t offer anything like a DVD of his life and times. Their goal was different. Their concern was to declare that the power that brought the world into being, God, was fully disclosed to us in the one who was born as we are. Hebrews says the Son *...is the reflection of God’s glory, the exact imprint of God’s very being* [He 1:3]. And John says: *what came into being in him was life, and that life was the light of all. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never overcome it* [Jn 1.3b-4].

These are not the words of Jesus, nor are they words of historical record. They are words of faith put forth by people led by the Spirit who wanted us to comprehend what for them became the inner logic of the universe and the clue to the meaning of life. What they say is that God is, and there is a relationship of grace between humanity and God. A relationship in which, everything that is meant by “God” is fully expressed in the life of one of us: a person who knew the heights and the depths, even exile and death. If God is with us in such a way, the very being of humanity is upheld at the highest level. And if that is the case it affects the question: how shall we live? We are invited to participate in the divine project in the world as Jesus did: which is to live fully in the light of life, and live for each other in love.

Fewer people now find meaning in these things. One outcome of the surge in Atheism is that our sources of faith and wisdom have suffered some setbacks. We find the wells of our spiritual tradition have been blocked with rubbish, covered over, or downgraded because they are supposed to have been surpassed by other forms of wisdom. What has not changed is that we know the struggle to be human is real. We have the capacity to destroy ourselves and are constantly challenged by our incapacity to save ourselves. How difficult we find it is to build a free and more life-giving future for all. In an uncertain world the church is called to keep its memory, to hold onto the source of its wisdom: a source that keeps open the unconditional possibility of new life for all.

The film “*Of Gods and Men*” is a true story about a small group of French Cistercian monks who were executed in Algeria in 1996. The monks had a small mission in a poor, predominantly Muslim area where they lived simply, and cared for the people. In particular Brother Luc, who had some medical training, ran a clinic that was a huge support to the villagers. The film traces the last three years of the monks’ life, as they have to decide whether to stay or go from the village – a decision that put their commitment to their calling under the searchlight. A rebel group that presents a direct threat to them has risen in the land. The government ordered them to go home but they refused. The Military intimidated the monastery because it deemed the monks to be too friendly with the rebels. The villagers appealed to them to stay, because the presence of the monastery gave them stability and support to continue in harsh circumstances.

A young woman from village worked in the monastery garden. During a break she sat in the sun next to Brother Luc. Her father had set up an arranged marriage for her and she had a question for the monk: “How do you know when you are in love?” Brother Luc replied: “It is irrepressible, an obsession, a desire. It is turmoil.” She replied: “I feel none of those things”. There was a pause and she asked: “Have you been in love?” “Several times” said Brother Luc. “Then I encountered a Greater Love, and I answered that. I have followed it now for 60 years.”

Our traditional wells of spiritual nourishment may have become contaminated with rubbish or blocked or superseded but the life and death of Brother Luc and his confreres makes no sense at all unless we can see that they were moved to embody the Greater Love we celebrate this day. The Greater Love allowed the monks to see all people as lit by the light of God and worthy of their care. This is the love of which Christmas speaks. If this light is allowed to play in our lives, it makes a difference to the way we see each other. And the way we live in the world. May it be so for us.
