

Christmas Day
25/12/2012

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 52:7-10

Psalm 98

Hebrews 1:1 - 4

John 1:1-14

The humanity of God and our humanity

Christmas is in the air! The Lakemba Mosque in Sydney hired a Sky Writer to write “Merry Christmas” in the sky above it, to offset suggestions the Mosque has taken steps to outlaw the celebration Christmas by its congregation. Interfaith issues and questions of political correctness have combined to raise new questions for us, and pushed the boundaries of the way of life we once took for granted. A work-relations lawyer wrote of how employers have been distributing “approved Christmas cards” – sanitised of any references to Christianity or religious words like “blessed”. And he quoted a journalist who attacked the “cynical attempts by Christians to hijack the whole fiesta [of Christmas] for their own religious ends” [Adam Ch’ng, *The Drum*, 20/12/2012]. What is this “fiesta” that causes such a fuss? What is the deeper meaning of Christmas that even so gives rise to such joy? What meaning and purpose might it have for others in our world today?

There is an irony in the fact that the key feasts of the Christian Church, Christmas and Easter, are based on the facts of the Incarnation and Resurrections, two of most difficult things to explain. We are not here to explain them, but they are both part of a structure of memory that is intended to give shape to our worship and our living. There are contested claims over the memory of these facts. But we do not set them aside. In reality there is no knowledge, in science, theology or anything else, without a basis in some form of belief. There is always a point at which we are called to trust in what lies beyond the known. When we gather to touch base with the facts of our faith, we renew contact with our identity as people of faith and the truthfulness of who we are. In the case of the Incarnation the strength of the memory testifies that, through a life that came to birth, something significant emerged that affected us, and it had implications for all people.

What did the ancient people want us to know when they passed on these intricate memories? People who write biographies or do family history sometimes find that a good place to start is with what became of the person. The Gospels came into being after Jesus’ death and Resurrection. From that perspective his followers began to use persuasive language about him, because of his ideas, and what he did, and because of the challenge he presented. His life and death revealed something crucial that made a difference to the human landscape. It brought into being a community that sought to live according to a new ethos. From the perspective of the end, the four Evangelists were at pains to show how, even in infancy Jesus was a child of the Spirit whose life provided fresh insights into the nature and intentions of the unseen God.

Of the four Evangelists John's picture is the most exalted. *The Word became flesh and lived amongst us, and in him was life, and that life was the light of all people.* In terms that resonate with the Creation story John declares that, from the beginning, the Word: the living, creative energy that is God streamed out towards us and was embodied in a life. John says that everything he stood for spoke to us of the unseen God. And there was an intrinsic connection between his life and the life of all. Ironically, such exalted origins did not set Jesus apart from us as a superior, extra-worldly being. Instead it led to him being identified with us fully: in his birth, the experience of fleeing, his life of teaching and mixing with sinners, the conflicts he aroused and in his death. He shared all our vulnerability and insecurity. And what God poured into him he lovingly and faithfully gave back to God.

Two thousand years ago this knowledge caused an eruption of deep joy because it was seen that in him selfless love had come to greet us, to offer us hospitality in a relationship in which it is possible to thrive, and know lasting joy.

Our hymns and liturgies reflect the intricately carved stories of the Incarnation that offer us a memory that translates into way of reading life. It is difficult to understand. The early Christians took three and a half centuries to find words for this that did not completely break down. And their efforts are still contentious. They hammered out what we will sing in our last Hymn: *True God of true God, Light of light eternal, Son of the Father, begotten, not created.* Their aim was to ensure that, through the ages it would be remembered how God's promises to us were *fully embodied in this life.* To paraphrase what the preacher who wrote Hebrews said: "there were hints about this in the past. The prophets left some clues. But then came a life, in which was embodied, before our very eyes, the perfect reflection of God's being".

This memory is decisive. Through a life like ours it becomes possible to read who God is and what God wants. Above all, it changes how we approach life together as humans. If the unseen God took flesh and lived amongst us then every human being is a sister or brother of the Human One. That sounds simple, but it translates into meaning that from God's point of view, there are no outsiders. The family of the Word-become-flesh includes the whole world of humanity: the terror struck, grieving people of Sandy Hook, the devastated people of Syria, the fearful occupants of leaky boats heading for our shores. We are joined by something stronger than blood: we are joined by divine life. To hurt or destroy, or refuse care to one another, is to refuse God. That is why efforts towards peace and reconciliation, and efforts towards human development and the renewal of the earth are expected to flow from the new community that arose with Jesus. It was no accident the early church cared for the least. And it becomes clear why still followers of Jesus commit to enduring social and political actions concerned with reconciliation, justice, peace and the protection of life.

Western Culture has many questions about the believability of the story we are here to celebrate. And much of what we think about it has become divorced from its real meaning. But at heart Christmas is a celebration of God who *lived amongst us* as one who re-values who we are and what we are for. The deeper meaning may be harder to glimpse than it was, but the story was told for a purpose: that its light might come to illuminate our lives. That means making some deep decisions about which way we seek to go, and what we want to see achieved in our world. In the light of Sandy

Hook there are deep questions for the people of America to ask about the value of life, and what they will choose to do, and to give up, to enable life to thrive in safety. But it doesn't stop there. The leader of the Opposition said in his Christmas message: "Australia is an open, decent and generous society". An Asylum Seeker sitting in a tent on Nauru hearing this must surely wonder which Australia he is talking about.

The ancient people found in the Christmas story a basis for deep joy. It did so because this memory, which they left as a gift to us, shines with the light of self-giving love that offers hope, and the foundation for a new vision of life. But that vision was offered for a purpose: to change hearts. To raise up people whose lives live in this light and enable others to know the ineffable joy that is the basis for a truly Merry Christmas.
