

Christmas Day
25/12/2016

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14

Being present

2016 has been a great year for expressing opinions: Brexit, Trump, the resurgence of nationalism in the liberal West; the tragedies of Nice, Orlando, Aleppo; terrorism; refugees; the ongoing debates about climate change. And, of course, much more. If you read the newspapers or listen to the radio you'll have seen and heard pretty much every conceivable opinion expressed on all these things.

In all of this opinion-expressing we wrestle with each other in a struggle to name where we are, how we are, what we are. That struggle is the sign of a deep restlessness within and a raging turbulence without, locked together in an endless cyclonic interaction. And in all of this we show that we are not at home in our world. There is not enough. Or there is too much. Or it is of the wrong kind. Or it should be mine and not yours. Or...

Into this struggle is added, around this time of the year, talk of a child about whom it is said that he is peace and joy and wholeness. This creates its own turbulence and, so, yet more restless opinions: the true meaning of Christmas, the cost of Christmas, the irrelevance of Christmas, the myths of Christmas, escaping from Christmas, the pathos of Christmas, the toleration of Christmas, the psychology of Christmas, and so on!

Those of us who choose to gather in this way today do so also because of another opinion or, in the old Greek – a “dogma”. That dogma, or opinion, is that even if – like us – Jesus was born into turmoil and created not a little turbulence himself, there is in him no restlessness and so no opinion.

We have already sung this morning of “the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes”. (Some of us sang that a little more wistfully than others!) In the old carol the line is probably not much more than sentimentality but, theologically, it speaks volumes.

A child who is vital and yet does not cry is a child who is at peace with where he is. He knows no restlessness and needs express no opinion or judgement. For such a one, here and now are enough, whatever turbulence swirls around.

We risk becoming sentimental ourselves here, of course; the point is not the wonder of an infant, the peace she is in her mother's arms. The dogma – the opinion – of the church is that this peace, this joy, this wholeness is what characterises the *whole* of Jesus' life. It is the peace, joy and knowledge of knowing that it's OK to be in *this* place – whichever place it is, however it is – because God is present here as well.

Restlessness is the sign of a sense that I need to be somewhere else, doing something else, being something else. It is the notion that I would be more alive if I were not me – here, now – but me (or perhaps someone else) in a different place. Restlessness reflects the sense that my present is the “wrong” present; there is more of me, and more of God, somewhere else. This is the thought which makes possible the suicide bomb, the endless gaze into a phone screen, the facelift, ethnic cleansing, the adulterous liaison, the abortion, “sovereign borders”, euthanasia and comfort chocolate: “not here”, “not this”,

“not now”. All such things are the restless opinion that life in all its fullness – even heaven – is to be found somewhere else.

In our reading from the letter of Titus this morning Paul writes of waiting for the “manifestation of the glory of our great God and saviour Jesus Christ.” This is a complicated little text and its meaning varies enormously depending on where we put the commas and which part of the sentence we think is referring to which other part. We *could* spend 10 or 15 minutes pulling it apart to establish the most *likely* meaning, but, instead, let’s just jump to the most *interesting* reading on the grounds that even if the most interesting reading is not strictly the most correct, it ought to be...

The “glory of our great God and saviour Jesus Christ” is not here some vague illuminating brilliance behind which God (or Christ) is hidden. Scripturally, the glory of God takes concrete form in human beings: Adam is the glory of God, as is Christ himself. The glory of God is the human being, fully alive (Irenaeus). And so, to borrow from Paul elsewhere, negatively: to fall short of the glory of God is to cease to be our true, created selves. In the scriptural story human restlessness springs from the turbulence of Adam and Eve’s apple-munching episode: the desire to be something other than what they were – in fact, the desire to have an opinion on what is right and not. Tragically, the first thing they judge and reject is themselves: “we are naked”.

By contrast, Jesus is peace, joy, salvation – is the “glory of God” – because he gets being human right. You can’t tell this by looking at him in the manger, when he expresses no opinion. You can’t tell it by hearing him on the mount or at lakeside, when his way is just one among many, however appealing. And you certainly can’t tell it by looking up at him on the cross, when his way is clearly too dangerous for the sane to follow.

And yet we confess in creed and sacrament that what occurs here is merely – but also *extraordinarily* – the uncorrupted meeting of God with a particular human life. God does not so much “become” human at Christmas as *meet* a human being who does not throw him off with a restless shrug. To say that here we have God and human being in one place is to say that God and human being have come together, without confusion, without change, and yet also without division, without separation. This is God making heaven out of the world – what all of our opinionising strives for but always fails to achieve.

At Christmas God reveals himself to be at home with us. And Paul’s “manifestation of the glory of our great God and saviour Jesus Christ” is nothing less than *our* entering into that extraordinary possibility ourselves: *we* are the glory we await; we await ourselves, fully alive.

Concretely, this is freedom from opinionated restlessness, whatever the turmoil around us; it is the freedom to be present to our present, to be at home in the world into which we were born; it is discovering where-we-are and how-we-are to be enough. That would be peace, joy and wholeness.

This is the one gift we cannot give ourselves. Yet, for Christ’s sake, God promises that it will be ours.

Thanks be to God.
