

Christmas 1
26/12/2021

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 3:1-24
Psalm 130
John 1:1-14

Space invader

In a sentence:

The incarnation is not about God 'invading' our space but making our space truly a place for us

In 1978 there probably appeared in a milkbar very near to you a “Space Invaders” game machine. Very cool!

It had a left-right movement lever, a single large plastic firing button, monotone 8-bit graphics and a gripping soundtrack. Space Invaders was a whole new world to the average 13-year-old of the day - not that this 13-year-old could afford to play it very much, but that was beside the point. It was, again, very cool.

Space Invaders was a shoot-em-before-they-get-ya game. The enemy was a space invader in a double sense: first and most obviously, it was an invader from outer space. Such invaders are nearly always bad. Second, and a little less obviously, it was a coloniser: the space enemy sought to occupy *our* space. These invaders are *always* bad.

But with this second sense, “space” itself needs to be stretched in meaning. When our space is invaded we are not dis-spaced but *dis-placed*. Space is too arid a concept to capture the loss of being dislodged. The coloniser sees space and takes it, but those already there lose not only their space but their *place*. Place is lived space – a home as distinct from a house. The violence of the coloniser includes the dissolution of place. The invaders might justify the invasion in terms of their need for “Lebensraum” (the Nazis) – living space – or that they are reclaiming lost space (Israel and the Chinese, among others). Yet space-invasion is violent nonetheless. In modern geopolitics, this kind of invasion is now relatively rare, but the experience of a challenge to place continues through the rise of the modern refugee; the refugee is an invader with moral rather than military claims on our space and place.

Space is not quite place. This difference is not merely [spatial] but is also social and psychological. Have we not felt displaced under the shadow of the virus these last couple of years? The COVID context aside, what we considered yesterday also relates to the distinction between space and place: wanting our lives to be comedic, but suspecting that they might be tragic. These are alienations in our own space – displacements even as our space stays the same.

But our sense of displacement is scarcely new. In the creation myth in Genesis 2, Adam is “placed” in the Garden and – by the end of chapter 3 – is again *dis-placed* with Eve as they are driven out of Eden. This displacement is marked with a number of curses: the joy of having children becoming a source of great pain, the distortion of the mutuality of human relationships and the struggle between us and the earth. These woes are not because of a “historical” expulsion from Eden but mark our experience that things are not right, the experience of having space but not quite place. This is our world, but it is against us; these relationships constitute us, but they are always troubled.

What Genesis 2 and 3 describe is the reverse of where the creation narrative of Genesis 1 began: in the beginning is not nothing but a chaotic, deep void. This is “mere” space into which God speaks to create place. With the Fall, however, space without place “returns”. Adam and Eve only know place before the Fall; the tension between space and place first appears in Genesis 3. From the point of Genesis 4 – from our point of view as the children of Adam and Eve – displacement is all we have known, and it is uncomfortable. From there, the human being fanned out into the world to fill it with cities, to invade each other’s spaces, and to invade the heavens. The Genesis pre-history portrays space as distorted place into which God doesn’t quite fit, or us. What we come to call “the human condition” is just this displacement. In a world like this, God is alien, and we are too. Most of the time, God is not present and, when present, it is only to “intervene” – to “come among” – before departing from our space again. Such an interventionist God is the space invader *par excellence*. The soundtrack to the old video game is suddenly the tune for a Christmas carol.

It is within a world like this that we hear from John’s gospel: “And the Word became flesh...” After Genesis 3, this can only mean: the Word *invaded* the world, for the world is now not a natural place for God. “He came to what was his own”, John writes, “but his own rejected him.” Compromised space does not easily recognise the place which God makes. The crucifixion is a radical displacement of Jesus from his place among the people, casting him out of even that compromised place into a mere space outside the city. In the crucifixion, we read God’s approach as an invasion, and we reject it.

What happens when the place-making God is thrust into outer space – the cross, outside the city, formless and void? Is the cross a Godless space or a God-filled place? We are at the crux (cross!) of Christian faith. The question is not, Did God enter the world at Christmas. Or rather, this *is* the question, but it is the same as the Easter question: Is the place-making God attached to the space of the cross?

Our answer to this is everything, which is why the Creed hammers the Christology: God from God, light from light, through him all things were made. This is not about getting mere theology right for its own sake, whatever that could mean. All of the extraordinary things said about Jesus in the Creeds are said about the one who is *crucified* – whose story looks finally to be tragedy, to recall what we considered yesterday. The question answered here is whether the harsh space of the cross – or the radical humility of a manger – can be the creative place of God.

Pastorally – in connection to us – the question asked is whether *our* experience of displacement is within God’s healing reach.

And the answer is, Yes.

God is not absent, occasionally invading our space. Rather, God makes place. God creates a “rest in peace” which is not death and the loss of all space and time but peace *in* time and space. As in Genesis 1, so also here: the deep empty of our displacement – in *this* God’s hands – can be made to be place and life.

John might have written: “He came to what was his own, but his own *space-d* him. But to all who did receive him, he gave *place* as children in the family of God” (cf. John 1. 12f).

Is there a home in the world, or are we just invaders of space who must yet fear now being invaded by God or some other threat?

God has “made his dwelling among us” John writes. God comes home in the place-d incarnation. As Adam was placed in the Garden, Jesus is placed among us, naming us as God’s own place, making flesh – our flesh – into Word.

Let us, then, make place for God, and for each other.
