

The Good News in Foggy Times...Advent and Christmas 2018

Peter Vardy, a colleague from London University, used to explain the dilemma of our times this way.

Imagine you are at sea in a raging storm. You desperately look for a place of safety, some rock to cling to, some refuge where you can escape the ravages of the currents that carry you in one direction and then another: all while you struggle to stay afloat

For generations, people have in one way or another sought this 'rock', this refuge, from which they can scrutinize and make sense of the world and themselves. Philosophers have referred to this coveted secure place as "Truth" with a 'big T'. Christianity has also explained itself in these terms, where God in Jesus is the one who is and furnishes Meaning, Truth and Value in an unstable world. In recent times, society has called off the search for the 'big T', including God, doubting that any such rock of certainty actually exists. Today we hear that it is altogether wiser to accept that there are no fixed landmarks in a water-world, where everything is flux and change, and where all depends upon one's individual perspective. The German thinker Nietzsche, anticipated this contemporary mood at the end of the 19th century when he wrote, "facts are precisely what there are not; only interpretations". While thinking and living this way, offers untold freedom, nevertheless, a world where everyone makes their own reality and truth, is exhausting, and ultimately solitary, where we cannot understand or be understood.

But this is not the whole picture. There is also a significant proportion of any community that refuses this approach to life and living. These people - many of whom consider themselves Christian - push back at the idea that there are no 'rocks', no places of security, no points of Meaning, Truth or Value. In pushing back however, 'the rock' which they embrace, often becomes rigid, closed to anything other than fixed and sometimes fundamentalist ideas. Such people yearn for the old certainties, and demand that the only relevant measure of the present, is that it looks as much like the past as possible.

To both these groups that characterize our current modern situation - the narrative of Christmas offers something new and freeing.

For the first group - who are often referred to as *post-moderns* - the good news is that we are not alone, we are not swallowed up in our own subjectivity and solitary-ness, where our personal opinions by necessity carry the weight of Truth. Rather, the Christmas event is about God, the big 'T', who of his own free-will is "for us". Karl Barth, the most prominent of 20th century Protestant theologians, put it like this: "[God] wills to be ours, and He wills that we should be His. He wills to belong to us and He wills that we should belong to Him. He does not will to be without us, and He does not will that we should be without Him".

For the second group, who grab faith as an insurance policy against change, the good news is that faith that comes from defensiveness, is unnecessary. The Christmas event of God made human, is proof positive that even God changes, that the way He communicates himself to us modifies through history and over time. God, coming to us as child is very different to God who came to his people in the Exodus, even though it is the same God.

Christmas - God in Christ come for us - frees us from the burden of ourselves: the burden of our loneliness and the burden of our defensiveness.

Happy Advent and Christmas! Enjoy those you find easy and love those you don't!

Geoff