

## First Sunday after Christmas

Readings: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 148: 1-13, Galatians 4:4-7, Luke 2:22-40

### Conscience and Consciousness

#### Introduction

Story-telling lies at the heart of all human existence. We are born into stories: those that stem from our families, those that stem from our communities, those that stem from our societies, those that stem from faith and faith tradition. These stories take on great weight in our lives, becoming myths – not in the sense of fantastic, the fruit of fantasy – but in the sense of foundational, basic, primary, framing our consciousness. Last Monday, Christmas Day, we listened to the mainstay of Christian faith – the story of the incarnation, the birth of Jesus, of God come among us. In the sense of weight, in the sense of its foundational meaning, in the sense of a story that frames our consciousness, it carries mythological clout, authority. But here lies the challenge: to understand its significance. That is what I want to achieve this morning. To explain the significance of the Christmas Story, of the incarnation.

To do this, I want to compare, to contrast, the Christmas Story with those of the same classical period, of the surrounding context. And then, I want to draw some conclusions in the light of today's readings.

#### The Christmas Story

The idea of the birth of God or the gods was not new in antiquity or indeed before it. In innumerable episodes of mythical birth, the god copulates with a mortal woman to give birth to a hero. What makes these stories, is that there is always more than a hint of violence. Zeus, for instance, bears down on the human woman, Semele – who was to become the mother of Dionysus – like a beast of prey upon its victim, striking her with lightning. The birth of the gods is always – and this is no exaggeration – a kind of rape. In almost all cases of the birth of a god, there is the feature of monstrosity. In almost all cases, we find the doubling effects, the mad oscillation of differences, and the psychotic alternation between all and nothing. These monstrous couplings between gods and humans are about violence and violence is the way in which they work themselves out. The point of these mythologies is this: that the union of gods and humans, underscores that *violence* is part and parcel of life lived, that violence is the norm, violence is the deal. Violence is written in the heavens - get used to it!

But let's turn for a moment to the Christmas Story, to the account of the incarnation. To put its message across, the story of the Virgin Birth still resorts to the same code as those others of antiquity. But precisely because the codes are parallel, what stands out, is the message, which turns meaning on its head, inverts it all.

No relationship of violence exists between those who take part in the Virgin Birth. While Herod plays the role of the antagonist in Matthew's version of the events, he is worked around through the wisdom of the pagan Magi, who go home another way. Herod is neither removed or shattered by divine violence. Moreover, the complete absence of any overt sexual element in the Virgin Birth, has nothing to do with puritanical repression-- an explanation thought up at the end of the nineteenth century. Rather, it has to do with the

rejection of the traditional violence of rape by the gods. In fact, all the themes and terms associated with the Virgin Birth convey to us submission to the *non-violent*, pacific will of the God of the Gospels, who in this way, prefigures Christ himself.

### **Meaning**

So what is it that the account of the Incarnation, the story of the Virgin Birth tells us? Surely, it tells us of God among us in the form of Jesus of Nazareth. It also tells us of the *how* of God among us: God breaks into the life of the world, gently, mildly, softly, kindly, non-violently: this is what Simeon and Anna celebrate. But there is something else here as well that is rarely if ever pointed out and it is this: that in the Incarnation, God breaks through the borders of men and women's definition of what it is to be human, providing a new way of understanding the human, that ultimately casts-off, discards violence. For Christians, to be human, includes the call and the commitment to be non-violent.

My final words for this year are these: that the Church fails at times to understand her own Gospel. Her incapacity to respond satisfactorily and in good-faith to the problem of paedophilia over these last almost 20 years, since its exposure by the Boston Globe, is a refusal to see *within her own soul, her violence done to minors*. To the extent that bishops fail to grasp the tragedy, instead falling upon the defence of traditional practice such as inviolability of the confessional, makes it very difficult for the Christian Church as a whole to be heard and taken seriously. The call to society to resolve its problems in other ways, other than those of violence, is perhaps the most compelling contribution that the Christian Church can make in these times. Yet we will never be heard if we do not set our own house in order.

The words of the ancient Church's call to creative non-violence, grounded in the Incarnation were these

*Vicit agnus noster, eum sequamur*

*Our Lamb has conquered. Let us follow him!*