

First Sunday after Christmas

Readings: Isaiah 63:7-9, Psalm 148: 1-13, Hebrews 2: 10-13, 16-18, Matthew 2:13-23

“The Beauty, the Allure, the Charm, the Grace of Christmas”

Introduction

Christmas morning is an extraordinary time: there is nothing quite like it. It is a message of hope, grounded in the sheer good-will of God. It is, according to Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth – the account we read every December 25th – an event of pure joy: resplendent with angels, rustic but receptive shepherds, and a woman, Mary, who is willing, utterly willing to be *the* vehicle for God’s goodwill in history. In short: Christmas morning is about light, sheer light. Christmas morning is an extraordinary time, there is nothing quite like it.

But light has no meaning if there is no opposite. Light is light because darkness is darkness. In other words, light must always have a referent, light lights something up: the dark. This is the instinct in our kid’s story as Jimmy’s Dad says “You shone”, Jimmy, “bright enough to light up the darkest of skies”. And so, it is with Matthew’s witness to the Christmas event. Matthew’s version of Christmas is very different to Luke. While Matthew, proclaims the same conviction of God’s good-will, of God’s light, he makes us focus not on that alone, but equally upon the world, the real world, where God’s good-will attracts not just human enthusiasm – as in Luke – but human opposition. The referent of God’s light in Matthew is darkness – and it is a meticulously woven understanding which offers subtlety and nuance. For Matthew, the darkness shows itself above all, among the card-carrying believers, *the insiders*, those who *should* understand and rejoice, but who don’t: Herod, a supporter of the Temple, a Jew, sets himself to murder the innocents, with the intention of scooping up Jesus in the net of victims. For Matthew, it is *the outsiders*, the magi, the Iranian pagan scholars, who *really see*, and who celebrate, who pay homage. This insightfulness: that the darkness often comes from the “children of the light”, makes Matthew’s Christmas event, worth thinking about, for that reason alone.

Matthew’s Profound Understanding of Hope and Hopefulness

But my intention is not to work on that front with you, justified and fruitful as it may be. Rather, I want to focus upon Matthew’s profound understanding of hope and hopefulness. Put in a nutshell, put pithily, Matthew understands that hope is only hope when it has to struggle, struggle with the real world, struggle with what I call “the weight of reality”. I want to suggest three dimensions of hope and hopefulness to you that come to us from Matthew’s Christmas event: first, hope is a discipline; second, hope is performative; and third, hope involves tears.

Hope is a Discipline. As modern people, we have a strong tendency to think of hope as a feeling, an emotion; a bit like joy or perhaps desire. But in fact, it is nothing of the sort. Hope is rather, a disposition, a discipline, a way of living that contends with all the reversals that arise, all those events of un-hope with which we struggle. Hope is more than mere optimism, hope is as the ancients called it, “a virtue which suggests a practice that has been developed”. The German philosopher, Ernst Bloch said it like this: “Hope must be learned”.

This is I think, one of Matthew’s real insights and one that applies as much to God as to us. In Matthew’s story of the incarnation, we hear of God’s *own* struggle against political and social forces that attempt to thwart the light, his light, the God-child. God learns to persevere against the powers represented in the ‘believer’, in the insider, Herod. Today, God continues in that struggle, persevering against self-declared Christians who do more damage than good. For God, hope is a discipline, not just a feeling.

Hope is Performative. Buried in the idea that hope is just a feeling, an emotion, we moderns keep it locked away in the recesses of our hearts. But hope is something that exterior-izes itself, hope becomes public in the real world through *doing hope*. There is a sense in which, the mere act of being able to imagine an alternative future, loosens the grip a painful past and present has over us. This is again, the experience of God in the incarnation. For Matthew, God’s hope for the world leads to *action*, to *engagement* in the world, through the birth of Jesus.

Hope necessarily carries Tears. As we strive to live hope out not just feel it; as we strive to give hope concrete expression, not just lock it up in the privacy of our hearts, the gap between the hope we hold onto and the reality we experience, carries tears with it: this is I think, Matthew's fundamental insight! In his rendition of the Christmas event, Rachel, is the symbol of tears: the pretty one who Jacob loved; the pretty one who remains childless for so long; the pretty one who finally gives birth, but who dies in the process. Matthew's story of Jesus' birth is about God's own tears as he realizes that even from the word go, his own Son will be persecuted and ultimately killed.

For Matthew, and for all of us, hope carries its own burden...but not for that reason can we stop hoping; for hope is ultimately grounded not in us, but in God's love and mercy.

That is the beauty, the allure, the charm, the grace of Christmas.