

**Sunday, December 22nd, 2019, Advent 4**

**Readings: Isaiah 7:10-17, Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25**

## **How to Speak and think about Love**

### **Introduction**

Today we have lit the final candle of Advent. We first spoke about hope, then peace, then we sang last week around the themes of joy through the carol service; and today we end Advent speaking and thinking about love. To speak about love at all is a ‘tall order’: it lends itself to myriad ways of conceiving it. But to speak of love in just 15 minutes and to do so in a way that may make an impact, is difficult indeed. But that is the opportunity we have, so let us grasp it!

Written by the Russian poet and author, Boris Pasternak, *Dr Zhivago* is set in the volatile years between the initial Revolution of 1905 – what Lenin referred to as the “Great Dress Rehearsal” for the October Revolution of 1917, and the outbreak of World War II. In our clip, we alight upon a discussion between Zhivago and the leading Bolshevik, Strelnikov. Fleeing the violence to eastern Russia, with his family and others, the train stops and Zhivago gets out to stretch his legs and take in the beauty of nature, to the sublime music of “Lara’s Theme”. Running through the woods, he is confronted by Strelnikov’s guards, wrestled to the ground, and interrogated by Strelnikov himself. The conversation is one of the most striking parts of the movie, as both men talk philosophically about the times which have swallowed them up. It is in fact a discussion about love. What emerges is a two-fold interchange: love understood as intimacy and then love understood as community. As the conversation picks up pace, once Strelnikov is satisfied that Zhivago is not a White agent, bent upon his assassination, he, Strelnikov, leans forward, asking about Zhivago’s celebrated poetry.

***“I used to admire your poetry. I shouldn’t admire it now. I should find it absurdly personal: feelings, insights, affections. It’s suddenly trivial now. The personal life is dead in Russia. History has killed it”.***

For Strelnikov, hardened by the excesses and demands of revolution for a better world, the curious conclusion is that intimacy, affection, communion have no place.

And then, the conversation turns from love, less understood as intimacy, to love comprehended in its wider social setting: love as fairness, as civility in the public square. Referring to the killings of the citizens of the small town of Mink for an alleged sale of horses to the enemy, the White Russians, Strelnikov justifies the actions, claiming they make a necessary point. Zhivago, not blind to the contradiction of murdering innocents in the fight for justice, cuts through with the words:

***“your point, their village”.***

The conversation abruptly ends. In this striking dialogue, the term love, while never being mentioned, characterizes the thoughts of both men, and proposes the question: how can love survive in the real world, how can love as intimacy, how can love as fairness, possibly endure?

## **The Gospel Reading” Luke 1:18-25**

It is this question of the possibility at all of love enduring, finding expression in the real world, that the Gospel reading addresses. Of course, the primary concern of the reading is to tell the story of the miraculous conception of Jesus through the advent of the Holy Spirit. Modern rationalism, even Biblical studies entertain some reservations about the miracle, but that said, this story carries other meaning beyond the bare bones of the story line. Let’s look at it just briefly!

### **Love as Intimacy**

Joseph is a man open to opportunity. On the cusp of a change in his life, wherein he would enter society in a new way—as a husband—he finds he is also to be a father: not what he expects. On the one hand, as a faithful Jew, he would have been familiar with the stories in the Hebrew Bible of miraculous births: the cases of Sarah, Hannah, even Elizabeth. But all of these, while highly unusual, were through natural agency, not direct intervention of God. This claim of Mary really would have appeared to be ‘over the top’ even to a pious Jewish man. And yet, sceptical as he may have initially been – at least before his dream – Joseph, genuinely in love with Mary, seeks to protect her. Let’s be clear, this was not a woman’s world. Penalties for illicit pregnancy were serious (see Deuteronomy 22: 20–29). If the woman were not executed, at the very least, the man was expected to very *publicly divorce* her, disgrace her, shame her. Yet this is not what Joseph considers. There is an attachment to her, a love for her, an intimacy between them, which he honours. Rather than shaming her, he considers, reluctantly, to divorce with discretion. He is caught between the honour of his family – the usual priority – and his loyalty to her. Here, in hostile circumstances where women were brutally ostracised, Joseph goes well beyond the norm, putting his own reputation at grave risk.

### **Love as Fairness**

What is stunning about this narrative is that Joseph retains an open mind as to what love as fairness might mean, might look like. Initially, on the basis of the evidence, he decides for divorce, but because of his closeness to Mary, he thinks and re-thinks it, again and again: that is the implication of the passage. But then things change. As he sleeps, we hear that he hears confirmation of Mary’s version of events. Up to now, he sees himself as at the centre of a fairly common series of events, where a woman’s fate lies with a man’s decision. But now, things change. He is no longer the subject and Mary the mere passive object of his choices. Rather, the tables turn, and God is the subject, Mary the partner, the God-bearer (*theotokos*), and Joseph has the strength of character to see that his place is just a supporting act: to offer patrimony through adoption, to offer lineage. The key words are these: “And Joseph awoke from sleep”. Surely, he did in the physical sense, but more significantly, *he woke up to himself* and saw fairness in an altogether new way. With this new insight, he commits to being with Mary and becoming with her, a vehicle of history for liberation.

Amid the direst and discouraging, among the most unpromising and foreboding circumstances, love as intimacy, love as fairness, turns reality around. Love endures.

