

First Sunday after Christmas

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

The Joy and the Melancholy 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 that is not all that needs to be said at Christmas. Light is light only because of its opposite. Light only has meaning in the darkness. And that is the purpose of the Gospel of Matthew's version of the Christmas story, is to explain that. While Luke romantically celebrates the sheer magnificence of Divine goodwill, Matthew focuses his energy upon the complex nature of reality, the ambiguity of human beings, society and history, which the light exposes, reveals for what it is. In Matthew's story, we gain a glimpse of this human ambiguity in the telling of the human resistance that the incarnation, the birth of Jesus, attracts. And what surprises, is not that the resistance comes from expected sources, *outsiders*: for instance, the traditional enemies of Jewish identity –such as the Romans – but instead, from *the insiders*, from the pious religious establishment, those who *should* understand and rejoice at Jesus' birth, but who don't. In Matthew's Christmas story, the insider of insiders, 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. In Matthew's Christmas story, it is *the outsiders*, the magi, the Iranian pagan scholars, who *intuitively see*, who really celebrate, and who really pay homage. Matthew's insight is this: that the darkness often comes from the "children of the light". It is this alone that Matthew's Christmas event, worth thinking about.

Matthew's Profound Understanding of Hope and Hopefulness

It is because of that – that reality is always more complex, full of twists, where nothing is as expected – that Matthew has a particularly compelling and intelligent understanding of what hope and hopefulness mean. Back on the First Sunday of Advent, we lit the candle of hope and reflected upon it from what I called "first principles": that is leaving the Bible aside and thinking as modern people. But let's on this last Sunday of the Christmas season, lend an ear to what Matthew has to tell us.

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* which jump out at us. 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 Marxist 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 light of the God-child. God learns to persevere against the powers represented in the ‘believer’, in the *insider*, in those who *claim to be children of the light*, such as Herod. Today, God continues in that struggle, persevering against self-declared Christians who do more damage than good. Do I need to list them? 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. In Matthew, God’s hope for the world leads to God’s *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 may well be persecuted and ultimately killed.

Hope is a discipline, Hope is performative. Hope carries tears. Let us observe all three dimensions of hope as we listen to the story of students from Fisk University, Nashville Tennessee, as they thought through and lived out how to be vehicles of hope in the segregated south of the US of the 1960s (A Force More Powerful, DVD 1 – 27:11-32:51)