

Sunday, December 20th, 2020

Advent 4B: 2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16; Luke 1: 39-55 (Visitation and Magnificat) Romans 16:25-27, Luke 1:26-38

The Annunciation

Introduction

On November 7th, 1917, one of the earliest and most celebrated of sociologists of the Western world, the German, Max Weber, stepped to the podium to address nearly a hundred students from the University of Berlin, on the idea of vocation: the vocation of the scholar and the vocation of the politician. What was said in those two separate lectures, does not directly concern us, but the underlying ideas that formed the foundation for what he said, does. For years, Weber had pursued two main themes in his work: the first was that of the meaning of religion, and the second was that of modern western society's move to what he called "rationalization": in other words, the way in which, through the adoption and promotion of the sciences, modern human beings had stripped the world of its magic and mystery, had "de-magick-ed", "disenchanted" the world, which was what the term he used, *Entzauberung*, literally means.

Weber's point was that with the rise of science and evidence-based thinking – knowledge gained through observation – that life would become increasingly impersonal as if in a "steel structure"; that a world grounded in rationalization and calculation alone, would be both "dark and wintry". He said that if "science can do anything, it is precisely to uproot and destroy the belief that the world has any such thing as meaning" (Max Weber: *Charisma and Disenchantment: The Vocation Lectures*: Eds., P.Reitter and C. Wellmon, Introduction, xiv). This is not to suggest that Weber was some sort of outdated neanderthal, who denied the importance and weight of science and empirical thought. Quite the contrary: Weber used a myriad of tools in his intellectual 'tool box', including modern research methods, but his genius was to see how a world preoccupied by calculation and measurement, by quantification, could lose its way. He suggested that in such a world, we would drown in data, we would lose the enchantment of living.

Is this an overly pessimistic view of the dangers inherent in modernity? Does Weber exaggerate the problems of our times where we believe that most things can be mastered through calculation? Anecdotally, I would have to say that Weber's insight into our contemporary world has something to it. Frequently, my sons, three of whom work in large institutions ranging from UN related bodies, through federal and state governments, talk to me about the priority of quantification: always, always, measuring data. Each in his own way is acutely aware of the problem that Weber underscores: that we end up unable to "see the forest for the trees", we lose the point of it all. Improved technique for practical ends – the essence of western modern life – has its limits.

The Enchantment of The Annunciation

So, what is it that the story of the Annunciation tells us about the loss of enchantment in the modern world, where life is flattened to the calculative, and the question of the world's meaning is seldom asked? What framework does re-enchantment of the world through the Gospel offer to help grasp the world's meaning and behind that the Gospel's meaning in relation to the world? I make two observations:

First, this story of the Annunciation is *about the world's need, it is about the world's deficit. Central to that deficit is the sense we have as human beings of our own incompleteness, our*

existential yearning to be more - both as individuals and societies. To read this story intelligently, is to read it from the historical realities of the times from which the Annunciation arises.

The world of Luke's infancy narratives is consistently one of faithful people crying out, often in nationalist terms, for liberation, awaiting a Messiah. A 'son of the highest' who would ascend David's throne, was a hope which featured strongly among the writings of the Dead Sea Scrolls and elsewhere. Even after Jesus' death, on the Emmaus road the hope for liberation remains alive, is never negated (Luke 24:21). In the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:6), it achieves prominence in resurrection dialogue: "Will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" According to Luke, Jesus' vision of the kingdom includes the good news of liberation from oppression: freedom! It remains the enchanted vision and sets the enchanted agenda for a new world.

Turning to Mary; she herself stands as a model of these many hopeful poor - the so called *anawim* - who yearn for completeness, for dignity, on this side of the grave, not just the other. Mary's hope is very "this worldly" as our other reading that includes the Magnificat makes plain: "He has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52-53). Indeed, Mary's virginal state, confirms her vulnerability: a young girl caught up in the web of poverty and deprivation. Rowan Williams, former Archbishop of Canterbury captures this poor Mary in his poem, "Penrhys" (Penrhys: *The Poems of Rowan Williams*, 69-70), set in an actual public council estate in Wales, that was built upon an ancient medieval shrine to the Madonna: In it these young pregnant girls appear, talking to each other

*"Light cigarettes. One day my bus will come, says one;
they laugh. More use'n a bloody prince,
says someone else...."*

*Comparing notes, silently on shared
unwritten stories of the stubbornness
of getting someone born"*

Second, this story of the Annunciation, *is about God in Christ's turning to us in the world's deficit, turning to us in our yearning for completeness.* In fact, the very image of Mary's virginity is about this. In a world marked by rationalization and calculation - precisely Weber's point - we only see the virgin birth through the deficient lens of literalness: "did it happen, could it possibly have happened"? we ask. "Surely if Jesus didn't have a human father, then his genetic code would have been abnormal, he could not have been as one of us?", we aver. But thinking in this way misses the point altogether. The point is that through this extraordinary metaphor, this event, God's creative power is expressed - as unique as the initial creation itself. As Karl Rahner put it, "The child who began his life's journey from his mother's womb, remains forever as a divine reality. Through this birth, God's kindness and love for us - his *philanthropia* appeared" (The Birth of the Lord, *Karl Rahner, The Content of Faith*, 288).

The birth stories of Jesus, offer us moderns a path to the re-enchantment of the world, a path to finding meaning through the Gospel for the world and ourselves in it, in a way that disenchanting modernity, left to its own resources, cannot.

May you celebrate this coming Christmas, celebrating the Gospel's power for meaning and re-enchantment.

