



Fourth Sunday in Advent
Sunday, December 22nd, 2019
Love: How to Speak and Think of It



Rima: a Syrian Refugee in Amman Jordan with her son

Christmas is fascinating, as we repeatedly and insistently miss its point. It is a time and place when we are drawn, if we are willing, into life's drama, through themes of marginalisation, of people on the edges. In a very obvious way today, Jesus is marginalised by Santa Claus - that we all know: the inevitability of dominant market mechanisms. Santa is entirely more attractive. Moreover, in our current climate, there is ample evidence that the drive for profit, marginalises many people who are cheated of their salaries – especially young women. And as if we need to be reminded, as we read the Gospel of Matthew's rendering of the story of Jesus' birth and first months and years, refugees and asylum-seekers stand front and centre: after all Jesus was one of them. Read slowly and deeply, the Christmas story should unsettle us.

Today as we begin to enter into the story of the Incarnation, the focus falls upon Mary and Joseph. What is compelling is the manner in which this invisible woman, becomes visible, no less than the "bearer of God" (*theotokos*), in a male world, where women are frequently relegated to be no more than "men's mums".

With this in mind, we shall explore the theme of love, the fourth and final candle that we light in Advent. How to speak and think of love, when it is often sentimentalized, commodified, and rejected.

GATHERING

Announcements

Invitation and Greeting

In the name of God
In the name of the Son
In the name of the Spirit

The Lord be with you
And also with you

We are here
in the name of Jesus Christ

Hymn: Tell out my soul (TiS 161, Woodlands, Timothy Dudley-Smith)

Lighting the Advent Candle of Love

These last weeks, we have lit the candles of hope, peace, and joy. Today, we light the candle of love, and in so doing come to the end of Advent.

Because too many people are wandering in the wilderness, because too many people are sitting in the valley of the shadow of death, we light candles...

Because people all over the world are suffering and we are too busy to notice, we light candles...

Today we stop everything and light these candles: one for hope, one for peace, one for joy, and one for love...

May the light from these candles overwhelm the world...

May the light from these candles illuminate the valley of the shadow of death...

May the light and the fire from these candles burn away everything that prevents the love of God from being born among us...

Let us pray

O God

we are a people on a journey,
afraid of the unknown;

conflicted in the wilderness of our lives.

Accompany us through those experiences where we are left
suspended, numb, perplexed.

Help us to discover you again in familiar and new ways.

In our worry and despair, for you O God, we wait...

We wait...

When tears threaten to overwhelm us, we wait...

We wait...

When we long for a fresh start and newness of heart, we wait...

We wait...

When we consider the state of our world, we wait...

We wait...

When we have done all that we can, for you,

O God, we wait...

Amen

The Peace

BREAKING OPEN THE WORD

First Thoughts about Love

The nativity mystery “conceived from the Holy Spirit and born from the Virgin Mary”, means, that God became human, truly human out of his own love. The miracle of the existence of Jesus, the “climbing down of God” involves the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary! Here is a human being, the Virgin Mary, and as he comes from God, Jesus comes also from this human being. Born of the Virgin Mary, means a human origin

for God. Jesus Christ is not only truly God, he is human like every one of us. He is human without limitation”.

Karl Barth

The very fact of being born is something distressing. To be born means to come into existence without being consulted. Contingency and being called into existence unasked, are factors that belong to the reality of the finite spirit: the starting point of our life is in the hands of another. The human reality of the Word of God, Jesus, is inescapable. Even the Lord had to begin!

Karl Rahner, “The Birth of the Lord” in “The Content of Faith: The Best of Karl Rahner’s Theological Writings”.

“People who have come to know the love of God do not deny the darkness, but they choose not to live in it. They claim that the light that shines in the darkness can be trusted more than the darkness itself and that a little bit of light can dispel a lot of darkness. They point each other to flashes of light here and there, and remind each other that they reveal the hidden but real presence of God.”

Henri Nouwen

Isaiah 7:10-17

Heather Lakiss

Today’s reading is probably one of the best-known passages in the Old Testament. It is associated in our lectionary with Matt 1:18-25, Matthew’s story of the birth of Jesus. The latter quotes Isa 7:14 (Matt 1:23) which suggests that the Matthew passage is a fulfilment of the Isaiah text. That was certainly the understanding of the writer of the Gospel, and Christian tradition has long associated the two passages. However, to understand their relationship simply in terms of a ‘prediction’ and its ‘fulfilment’ is to devalue the Isaiah text and to misunderstand the Gospel. With regard to the relationship between the Hebrew and Gospel reading, we can offer two insights. The first is that the Hebrew reading does not necessarily speak of a ‘virgin birth’ as such. There is ambiguity in the meaning of the Hebrew word *almah* (Isa 7:14). The word is translated in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) by *parthenos*, and in the Latin Vulgate by *virgo*. While these words in their ancient contexts do not necessarily mean ‘virgin’ in our strict sense, that is the way the writer of Matthew has understood the Septuagint, from which he quotes Isaiah. Second, in this Hebrew reading, there is little interest in the identity of the woman: a sharp contrast with the Gospel, we read today, where the emphasis falls upon both Mary and Joseph. Joseph is further identified by his genealogy (Matt 1:2-16). We know who this mother and baby are with whom Matthew associates Isaiah’s prophecy. Third, the sign of Immanuel, ‘God with us’, is ambiguous in Isaiah. Is God with us to deliver us or to judge us? It seems the editors of Isaiah deliberately maintained the ambiguity of the sign God insisted on giving Ahaz. Is God ‘with us’ for deliverance or destruction, salvation or judgment? Can we separate the two?

¹⁰Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, ¹¹Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. ¹²But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. ¹³Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? ¹⁴Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. ¹⁵He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. ¹⁶For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

¹⁷The LORD will bring on you, on your people, and on your ancestral house such days as have not come since the day that Ephraim departed from Judah—the king of Assyria.”

Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19

Heather Lakiss

Psalm 80 is a lament. It probably had a liturgical use given the refrain in vv. 3, 7 and 19. The theme of waiting for restoration fits the psalm for Advent and it appears in the lectionary in Advent in Years B and C as well. The selection of a lament psalm like Psalm 80 is also appropriate in a less obvious way. Our Old Testament reading speaks about hope with some ambiguity, allowing the possibility of God’s judgment sitting alongside hope for God’s deliverance. It also speaks of that coming being in ways and from places that we do not expect. We cannot divorce our waiting and anticipation of the coming of God in Christ at Christmas from the turmoil of our world, its corruption and greed, its death and destruction. Nor can we presume that the coming of God in Christ will be in ways or through people easily recognised or expected. Lament and hope go together but the fulfilment of that hope will never be in ways we anticipate. The God we wait for is one of surprises, even though God’s story is ‘from of old, from ancient days’ (Mic 5:2).

¹Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth

²before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

³Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

⁴O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people’s prayers?

⁵You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

6 You make us the scorn of our neighbours; our enemies laugh among themselves.

7 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

8 You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.

9 You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land.

10 The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches;

11 it sent out its branches to the sea, and its shoots to the River.

17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself.

18 Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name.

19 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Romans 1:1-7

This letter is different from the rest of Paul's letters. He is writing not to a church which he founded, but one which probably had its origins in the work of other Christian Jews at least a decade earlier. He wants to write because he plans a visit (1:10) and intends to use Rome as a launching pad from which to move onwards to Spain and the western reaches of the empire (15:23-28). That latter plan did not succeed. Paul would spend his last days in Rome and there face a cruel execution at the hands of Nero. Faced with such a complex situation Paul takes great care to offer an account of himself, but more especially, of his theology, so that the Romans will welcome him and, more especially, share in his mission. It is a bonus for us that he felt he had to do so, because in this letter Paul distills into more careful formulation what in earlier letters such as Galatians he had declared somewhat more in the heat of controversy and with barbed argument. Finally,

His words "Grace and Peace" (1:7) are no standard greeting. They would surely sum up for Paul the very heart of his gospel and its hope. It is about real wholeness/peace, and grace is nothing other than the unlimited compassion of God which refuses to give up on us and calls to us to the gift of renewal and hope. For Paul that was not a state of bliss, but an invitation to live out that compassion in the world. Grace is a call to come on board, not to sleep at the bus station.

1 Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, ²which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, ³the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh ⁴and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, ⁵through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, ⁶including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, ⁷To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

***The word of the Lord
We give thanks to God***

Matthew 1:18-25

George Katsoolis

Why not begin at verse 1? What precedes our reading is the genealogy about Jesus' pedigree as traced through the male line: that of Joseph. Genealogies are traditionally male, today as then. But Matthew's genealogy is a different, odd: note the women mentioned. In essence, there is a breaking the male paradigm, it includes women, something unheard at the time. Moreover, note that these are not simply heroic virtuous women. First, they all have Gentile connections: not a good look. Second, these women are also all associated with sexual activity, some of which is highly controversial. That may reflect a not uncommon male tendency to view women in terms of their sexuality. It may also reflect the need which Matthew (or someone who gave him the genealogy) felt to justify Mary against the rumours about her sexuality and the insistence that God, the God of grace includes Mary – the inclusion of a woman who in terms of the gender politics of the day, is a no-body.

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah* took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' ²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he

did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;*- and he named him Jesus.

The Gospel of the Lord
Praise to you Lord Christ

**Hymn: When God almighty came to be one of us (TiS 281,
Urquhart, Michael Edward Hewlett)**

A Film Clip from Dr Zhivago (1:58.09 – 2.03.25): A Dialogue about Love.

Here we listen to a conversation between the Bolshevik Commander Strelnikov and the poet Zhivago over the life of love. Strelnikov, the ardent revolutionary has long since dismissed the life of emotion, the life of the weak, as self-indulgent and historically irrelevant. As the conversation continues, the consequences of the rejection of love as a public good, become clear, as they argue over the fate of the village of Mink.

Some Thoughts

Offering

Doxology
***Praise God, from whom all blessings flow,
praise him, all creatures here below,
praise him above, ye heavenly host,
praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost.***

Prayer of Dedication

Christmas Bowl – Act for Peace: Rima in Jordan

https://www.actforpeace.org.au/www_AFP/media/Christmas-Bowl/CB19-Resources/CB19-05-FourthSundayOfAdvent.mp4

Prayers of the People

Annette Burne

The one who prays ends each petition with the words, ***may we be people of love***, and the congregational response, is ***through how we live and what we do***

Lord's Prayer

Let us say the Lord's Prayer

***Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.***

***Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.***

***For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.***

하늘에 계신 우리 아버지여
이름이 거룩히 여김을 받으시오며
나라이 임하옵시며
뜻이 하늘에서 이룬 것 같이
땅에서도 이루어지이다.
오늘날 우리에게 일용할 양식을 주옵시고
우리가 우리에게
죄 지은 자를 사하여 준 것 같이
우리 죄를 사하여 주옵시고
우리를 시험에 들게 하지 마옵시고
다만 악에서 구하옵소서
대개 나라와 권세와 영광이
아버지께 영원히 있사옵나이다. 아멘

Closing Hymn: O come all ye faithful (TiS 304, vs 1,2,3, 5&6)

Blessing and Sending Out

Christ is life!

Let us live in love, disciplined, in love for others.
Actively waiting for the incarnation of God among us,
actively waiting for the kingdom

Our service has ended

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord

In the name of Christ

**Going Out: May the feet of God walk with you (TiS 779, Aubrey,
Robin Mann)**

Musical Postlude

Organist:

Tony Ireland