

Christmas Day

Isaiah 62: 6–12; Titus 3: 4–8a; Luke 2: 1–20

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Isn't Christmas wonderful? It's the same every year and yet it's always surprising. What surprises has it brought you?

A friend sent me a link to a Youtube video, showing people having lunch in the food-court of a shopping mall. It could be anywhere, but you know it's near Christmas because someone dressed as Santa is playing carols on a keyboard – the usual Christmas stuff. And then a new piece of music starts, and you recognise the Hallelujah Chorus, and you realise that someone is singing – it's that woman over in the corner – and when she gets to the end of her line suddenly two men are standing on chairs, booming out 'May the king live for ever!' and then a bank of women pick up the echo, 'Hallelujah! Hallelujah!' – and soon half the place is filled with people singing. A choir, obviously, but they all look just like shoppers – there are no uniforms, no music-sheets, just this gorgeous sound all around the place. The faces of the ordinary shoppers caught in the middle of this are wonderful: at first bemused, puzzled, then delighted, entranced – it's just lovely. And then the Chorus ends, and everybody claps, and they all sit down and get on with their lunch. At the end, there's a lovely shot of a skinhead who turns to his friend and seems to be saying: 'That was really brilliant.'

The film captures that sense that something special is happening at Christmastime, something surprising and wonderful in which a deep truth is being revealed; and people instinctively recognise it. This recognition survives underneath all the commercial hype, and the stupidity of Christmas television, and the awful slushy music in the shops (supposed to make you linger, but it doesn't have that effect on me). Despite all that nonsense, people keep expecting that surprise, that gift, that real thing we need in our lives.

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Is that a fantasy? Well if it is, personally I blame the Gospel writers. They were so convinced that something had happened, an event bringing into reality that deep truth, that real thing, that gift from out of nowhere – from GOD – they were so convinced that Jesus brought this gift that when they told his story, even about his birth, they couldn't keep their conviction of this truth out of the story.

So St Luke, as he tells the story we've just heard, gives us three signs, which to him show the hand of God present and active in these events.

The first sign is the Census, ordered by Augustus, a roll-call or registration of his whole empire. It took place in 6 AD, and though the date doesn't quite agree with what St Matthew says the event is real, and anchors the story in history. Whatever the Emperor's reasons for doing this, Luke discerns behind it God's reason: it is a universal event, which brings all Jewish males back to their ancestral city, to the land allotted by God in the beginning; and so the Christ could be born not in Nazareth (about which there were no stories) but in Bethlehem, the city of David, as the prophecy foretold. Luke invites us to see that nothing is accidental, that all things point to the truth of God, the truth which offers universal hope – if we can see it.

So that's the first sign, the Census, and the second sign is the Shepherds . Who are these shepherds? Ordinary folk, like you and me, 'the poor' for whom Christ came? Yes, they are that, and I think they appeal to us because of their ordinariness: we know we're more likely to find the truth of things when we're not putting on airs, trying to be 'great'. So, yes, the shepherds are just shepherds, but they're also something else. Jesus is called 'Son of David', and we recall that David, before he became King, was a shepherd. The Old Testament prophets hold up to Israel's rulers the image of the good king who is like a shepherd, caring for the flock, and not like a tyrant using power for himself. Here's Ezekiel 34 for instance, talking about God's people:

'My sheep were scattered, because the shepherds did not care, and they became food for wild animals, as they wandered on the mountains and on every high hill.' (Ezek 34: 5f)

So when we find these shepherds in the story 'dwelling in the fields' and 'keeping watch over their flocks by night' we see how things should be: it's a vision of a world of care that God intends, the new age that God is bringing to birth through the one who called himself 'the Good Shepherd'.

The third sign is the sign of the Manger. A child in a cattle-trough? – what's going on? And yet not a child accidentally in a cattle-trough, or cast away among animals, but carefully 'wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger'. As with the shepherds, but more so, the animal and human worlds are brought together, the two are made one, and not by accident but by design, a design that should make us think. The truth of God is to be found, not in sophistication but simplicity, and not in power but in humility. This is the Wisdom of God.

Behind these strange events, I think St Luke wants us to hear a particular passage connected to King Solomon. Now Solomon, of course, was a magnificent king, with his thousand wives and his great armies, but he was also renowned for his wisdom, a wisdom which we are told was given him when he opened himself to be guided by God (2 Kings 3: 5–12). In the Old Testament book called The Wisdom of Solomon (though not written by him in fact), the figure of Solomon speaks these words:

‘I also am mortal, like everyone
else, a descendant of the first-formed
child of earth; and in the womb of a
mother I was moulded into flesh, within the
period of ten months, compacted from blood,
from the seed of a man and the pleasure of marriage.

And when I was born I began to breathe the common
air, and fell upon the kindred
earth; my first sound was a cry, as
is true of all. I was nursed with
care in swaddling cloths. For no king has
had a different beginning of existence; there is
for all one entrance into life, and one way out.’ (Wisdom 7: 1–6)

Can you hear these lovely words as if on the lips of another one, who also ‘fell upon the kindred earth’ sharing our birth, and our death? – who was called a king, and also called the Wisdom and the Word of God?

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So we are given these three signs, and then a fourth one, the very visible, audible proclamation of the angels:

‘To you is born this day, in the city of David,
a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.’

They proclaim that in these events, this birth, the truth and the wisdom of God were breaking into the world, revealing their presence in the world, calling their hearers, and us, out into new ways of living, new possibilities. This truth, the call of God, we can all recognise in this Birth, because the seed of it is planted in our hearts. Our heart can recognise that truth even when our mind and our mouth are stuffed with carols and mince-pies.

Christmas is a universal feast, a time of sharing, because today God is identified with a birth, and that's something we all share. But the child in the manger grew up, and so did we – so where do we go from here?

Richard Rohr reminds us that everything we say about Jesus is also a statement about our own spiritual journey. If we think of Jesus mainly as a teacher, it may be that the journey is going on mainly in our head; if we think of Jesus as a healer, a forgiving one, it may be that he is calling out in us compassion. Jesus is both of these, and more, but how much of the whole Jesus – how much of the whole spiritual journey – can we venture into? What are we missing if we only think of Jesus as a newborn child?

The great joy of Christmas is that it stirs again into life that heart-seed planted by God, the seed of the knowledge and wisdom of God; stirs it up from whatever dark hole we've buried it in, whatever stage of delayed development we may have arrested it in; calls it up into the light. As St John tells us:

‘In the beginning was the Word
.... In him was life, and the life
was the light of all people. The light shines in
the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. And the
Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, full
of grace and truth.’ (John 1: 1, 4-5, 14).

May the grace and truth of Christ be with you all.