



Fourth Sunday of Advent

23rd December 2012

Micah 5: 2-5, Song of Mary, Hebrews 10:5-10, Luke 1:39-55

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen

The fourth Sunday of Advent, and just days before the celebration of Christmas, gives us an opportunity to join the dots of our Advent journey, to seek and discover where the star is leading us. And then to identify the arrow of Christmas, the direction or orientation that Christmas illuminates for us. When the star finally comes to rest in the nativity narrative it does not seek to illuminate a geographical location, rather it gives illumination to the place of enlightenment, and that in turn gives us a life orientation.

Before we look at today's readings, we should be mindful of the 'arrow of Christmas' that we have assumed or inherited. Culturally Christmas has a powerful and exciting impact directed toward children, and therefore most people (if not all) will have a sub-conscious 'arrow of Christmas' that points towards the past; an orientation of looking back and of memories. It is a powerful force of orientation that is hard to avoid, and in many cases is readily and delightfully embraced. We love the rekindled childhood energies of Christmas and these in turn are fed by the cultural nostalgia of Christmas and equally by the church's Christmas traditions and much of its theological understanding.

With our naturally occurring 'Christmas arrow' pointing toward the past, we encounter in the first reading today the prophetic voice of Micah. Without thinking about it there is an immediate tension set up for us; the prophet asks us to give up our familiar and embraced orientation that is embodied in our past and to look toward the unfamiliar and unimagined place of tomorrow.

Prophets should not be reduced to predictors of the future; that is a simplistic understanding of hindsight, another backward-looking orientation. Prophets are 'Advent stars', they lead us and give us an orientation that is beyond where we are. Like the Advent star they offer enlightenment and seek to lift our eyes to an orientation that is higher than both the actuality of our everyday vision and the nostalgic yearnings of our sub-conscious past. Micah's prophetic voice fits well with the Christmas narrative, not because it predicts Christmas; rather, it parallels the star-light that leads us toward our nativity, our Divine birth.

The gospel writer's use of Bethlehem as the place of rest for the Advent star may well have drawn on the tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures, but the significance is missed if it is seen only as a matter of geographical integrity. "*you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah*" is much richer in meaning and is spoken of as if it is a real being, perhaps as a reality of being for us all. In the book of Genesis, Ephrathah is the place where Rachel, the wife of Jacob, dies giving birth to Benjamin; and so Micah speaks of a "coming forth" from the place of death; a new order and a new orientation.

The "coming forth" Micah speaks of, the prophetic orientation toward the Divine birth of enlightenment, speaks of a bringing forth of life from the place of burial, a change in

orientation from all that is buried in the past to that which is illuminated by the Advent star that leads us beyond not just where we are, but also beyond all that we imagine. Micah's prophetic orientation speaks of a universal power, "*great to the ends of the earth*", and a power made manifest in the "*one of peace*". It is not the power we usually attribute to the powerful, for it is birthed in "*one of the little clans of Judah*", birthed in the motherless Benjamin.

Micah proclaims an invitation into a counter-cultural worldview, with an insight that again creates a tension with what we already know. He proclaims that, that which is smaller, and therefore seen as insignificant, is also that which contains the most potential. It seems counter-intuitive for us to think that something (or someone) weak, small, young, or unimpressive could yield great potential, but this is the reality of the nativity narrative and also of the Advent star that seeks to illuminate our very understanding of who we are.

The reading from Hebrews continues to join the Advent dots for us. And again there is a tension created with our past-pointing Christmas arrow. The reading clearly turns that arrow to the direction of the prophetic and states that: "*when Christ came into the world..... He abolishes the first in order to establish the second*". We are asked to move from the conventions of the past, and from a reliance on our religious practices to engage fully in '*doing the will of God.*' Hebrews takes us from nostalgic remembrances into the place of Divine activity; *And it is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.* The "*offering of the body of Jesus Christ*" is where the Advent star comes to rest, it is the place of Nativity where the Divine is birthed, and offered as gift into the hands of humanity. It is also the place where the Church begins, and finds its life, for as the Body of Christ we make real the divine activity of "*offering*".

The gospel reading now invites us into the actual nativity narrative; Mary and Elizabeth are icons for all of us and for all people everywhere. They, like each of us, carry within them (in the present moment) a life and potential which will become great (in the future). And as any mother will affirm, their orientation has been firmly turned toward tomorrow, to the place and activity of birth and to the ongoing commitment for realising the potential of that birth.

There is no denial or devaluing of the past, for all are brought to the present through that which has gone before; however, the activity of birth, of creation, illustrates for us that each moment, and our response to each moment, is creative of the reality of tomorrow. Our future and every future are birthed in the activity of today.

In today's gospel we glimpse the enormity of our part in the creation of tomorrow. Mary and Elizabeth are icons of ourselves, for all of us are pregnant with Divine possibility, each and every being carries within the very image of God. Mary and Elizabeth therefore offer an opportunity for us to reflect on our realisation of that which we carry; and more than that they invite us to approach Christmas with an arrow that points toward the future rather than the past. If we can stay with Mary for just a few more days and wonder at that which we bear within ourselves, that which we are being called, and empowered by Mary, to bring into the world for the benefit of all and for the magnification of all that is Divine. If we can stay with Elizabeth attentive for the moment when the seed of creativity is felt as a leap of joy, and then give thanks and acknowledge the blessing we know and feel within.

If we can approach Christmas with an eye toward the future, and with an expectation that we will bring about the shaping of that future, we might find ourselves, and realise ourselves,

centre stage in the manger of humanity. However, we must also be mindful that Mary's song of rejoicing was really written when she said Yes. And it can only be sung when we have silenced the nostalgic clamour of Christmases past. Mary had to let go of her familiar place in the world, and open herself fully to the Divine promise that is impregnated in the whole of humanity.

It is a wonderful song that identifies a reality for Christmas when the arrow is in the right direction.

It is a song of self affirmation:

all generations will call me blessed

An affirmation that is found when we can truly know the power of our smallness:

the lowliness of his servant

It is a song that gives thanks:

for the Mighty One has done great things for me

And it is a Song that illuminates a new a paradigm, a world birthed in newness of being:

Where the proud are scattered, and the powerful are brought down, where the lowly are up lifted, the rich are sent away empty and the hungry are filled with good things. Mary's song sings of the reality of Christmas, not as a past event, nor as a time to be remembered, but rather as the potential that we are pregnant with.

And it invites us into a new understanding of God. God is not the all-powerful and almighty power of traditions past; but rather the one that can be magnified by us and our very being. And of course that's why we have the baby in the nativity. Any parent knows that birth is but the beginning. That nativity asks of us to realise the fullness of God, for in that realisation we find the very fullness and fullfilment of ourselves.

Peter Humphris