



Fourth Sunday in Advent 22 Dec 2013

Isaiah 7: 10-16
Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19
Romans 1: 1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

Illustration 1: Advent 2

These sermon notes were prepared before the sermon was delivered and so do not transcribe the actual sermon word for word

“Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” Another of Isaiah prophecies, and once again it is usually interpreted as pointing toward the Christmas nativity, hence it is included in our Advent lectionary.

Matthew uses the prophesy of Isaiah to give weight to his gospel, and likewise Paul uses the prophets as a reference and also stresses the lineage of Jesus; this shows us a deliberate intention within the early church to hold on to their Jewish(Hebraic) tradition, and to bring about some changes to that tradition.

It was a faith tradition that held an expectation of a Messiah, and so that is how the early followers of Jesus promoted him within their tradition; he was for them the promised Messiah.

Just like today, there were the different orientations of liberals and conservatives within that tradition and so eventually as the two groups could not agree the early church separated from its tradition and became a distinct movement itself; however it still held to much of the theology and the traditional understanding of its past.

The same process can be seen with the reformation and the church’s response to Martin Luther in the 16th Century. He also sought to bring about changes, a new understanding to his faith tradition, the Roman Catholic Church. Luther never set out to create a ‘protestant church’, rather, he sought to reform the church he was a part of; and like the early church there were those who embraced change and those who wanted to hold on to their tradition; and so another separation and another distinct movement.

What these examples illustrate is perhaps a universal process; whenever change is proposed, some will embrace it and others will want to maintain things unchanged.

In the context of the church, we can all appreciate many changes that have taken place over the church’s history and even changes that have occurred during our own history within the church; most of these changes have been about order and organisation; the fundamentals have remained unchanged, and largely unchallenged.

One of the privileges of the modern age, for many but not all peoples, is that we have a freedom to explore and discover, and we have an opportunity to learn and converse with peoples from other traditions.

In our global world, we can readily see beyond the confines of the village and the traditions of our birth. We therefore have an opportunity to look beyond our inherited traditions, and so too we can more fully explore the foundations of our faith.

Christmas, the time of birth, is now very near; during Advent we have journeyed into the landscapes of the coming nativity and now we come near to discover the actuality of the 'birth' that Christ reveals to us.

2

And a question that might open us to discovery; did Christ really seek to confirm the belief systems of an exclusive minority religious people in one particular landscape, or does Christ reveal a more universal insight for the whole of humanity?

Matthew and Paul do want to embrace the 'new creation' that they encountered in Christ. And, like us they also want to hang on to what they already have, they also want validation of their past life encounters.

What if they, and we, were more fully open to a "new Creation" that might take us beyond all that we currently have and hang on to.

Perhaps, the gospel message was modified in order to make it easier for others to embrace what might otherwise be a radical new worldview. We should remember that they were seeking to excite a Jewish people to accept changes to their faith tradition, and that it was a faith tradition that was lived out in their daily lives.

But, we do not have such a tradition, nor do we need that enticing, or do we?

Perhaps we might approach Christmas remembering that Christmas, in our society, "is a time for children".

So what if we seek to encounter the nativity with empty hands and with that childlike desire for 'something new', for something that will satisfy that wanting desire that is woven into our DNA.

Can we look beyond our own tradition, can we look beyond ourselves....

What is revealed in Christ is counter-cultural to all that we hang onto, Christ was driven by those unseen forces that are beyond our usual seeing, perhaps that's why Matthew has the birth heralded by a star, a light from heaven... the same light from heaven that is found in the book of Genesis.

What are the drivers, the forces that give shape to our worldview, and that also create who we are...

The clocks of Advent give voice to a life that is ruled by time, and that same ruler confines us to the time between birth and death....

Christ reveals a timeless worldview, he knew the reality of eternity, and such insight almost demands that we create a story about his birth, for we want to locate him in our worldview, so Matthew creates the Christmas narrative; Paul does the same with his death, and sees that the resurrection gives us a knowing beyond the confines of our clockwork lives.

Reading the scriptures we can see the insights of one who knew his eternal being, the alpha and the omega, the wholeness of eternity.

3

Unshackled from past traditions, we can see so much more revealed in the nativity, for a new insight into who we are is given birth in the Christmas narrative.

Some will get lost in trying to reason the technicalities of a virgin birth, and others will proclaim a prophesy fulfilled; but is not the bearing and birthing of God a universal truth, and a pregnant capacity for each and every one?

In the modern, reasoning, world the difficulty that we have with immaculate conceptions is perhaps a projection of the difficulties we have created for ourselves in birthing the divine in our lives.

Today's gospel has Mary as its core, or does it? Mary is mentioned twice by name, Joseph is mentioned by name four times. What if we now read the gospel again with the title "the unbelievable dream of Joseph" and wonder at the possibilities for birth that are waiting to be awakened in our most unbelievable dreams.

The narrative of Christmas has many beginnings, the annunciation to Elizabeth of John the Baptist, the star that appears in the sky, the setting out of the Magi; and all those beginnings come together at the manger, the cradle of birth.

They all have something in common, Joseph empties himself of what he wants and gives himself to the realisation of the one bearing God, Elizabeth and John the Baptist live only with an orientation to Christ, and the Magi leave home, and bring their finest gifts to give of themselves into the very narrative of God's giving and God's gift.

When we come together for a night of thanksgiving on Christmas Eve, lets open ourselves to what is truly being illuminated under the star....

If this is the birth of the Messiah, then it is our birth.

If it is God's giving all into the world, then let's acknowledge the process and seek to give birth to the giving of ourselves.

Isaiah sees and speaks of promise, but it is a promise for all, not just for Ahaz and the people of Judah.

Joseph dreams of a divine conception, a universal dream of a New Creation
And Mary gives birth to that which is divinely pregnant within her, a child not for herself but
for the benefit of all humanity.

When we look into the nativity, we look beyond our clockwork lives, and see what we are
what we create and all that we are called to bring to birth.