



A Contemplative Christmas – Fright (Matthew 2. 1-18)

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Four weeks ago, we began our series A Contemplative Christmas, and there's a sense in which, for me, all of our services over this time have been leading to this week's theme, 'Fright'. We began with the traditional Advent exhortation to 'wake up', to pay attention to reality and the signs of newness; we then explored how the category of promise provided the interpretive framework through which Jesus was understood by his contemporaries, and how this same promise opens for us the possibility of living daringly, trusting in the reality of goodness. Last week, our theme was 'nativity', 'birth', and we celebrated the transformation in human consciousness that is possible because of Jesus' coming among us. Today, though, we face up to the truth of how difficult it is for us to do any of these things – to wake up, to trust, to let ourselves be transformed. We face up to our 'fright' and the violence it may lead us into. Or – to put all of this in another way – I believe that the Christmas story is completed only by telling the story of how Jesus was received – and, to say the least, his reception was mixed.

The gospel writers treat this theme in different ways. In Luke's gospel, the child Jesus *is* recognised and honoured – but mostly by those at the margins of social and religious life. The shepherds, the aged Simeon and the widowed prophet Anna all testify to the salvation he brings, but the holy family returns to live in obscurity in Nazareth until a later time. In Matthew's gospel, as we've just heard, the scene is much darker – with the newborn Jesus actively hunted by King Herod, leading to the flight to Egypt and the wholesale and indiscriminate slaughter of the 'innocents'. The Prologue of John's gospel distils this confronting narrative into two verses: 'He was in

the world, and the world was made through him; yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not’.

Our liturgical calendar, too, dramatises this dynamic of the arrival of God’s anointed met by our rejection. Christmas Day is juxtaposed with the Feast of Stephen on 26 December, and Stephen was the first Christian martyr, stoned to death in Jerusalem by an angry mob for testifying that God’s meaning is revealed by Christ’s life. God comes into the world, so to speak, and the first thing we do is to kill him and those who recognise him. That, at least, is what the liturgy invites us to experience.

So what is going on here? ‘You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you are forever opposing the Holy Spirit’, Stephen somewhat provocatively said to his accusers. ‘Which of the prophets did your ancestors not persecute? They killed those who foretold the coming of the Righteous One, and now you have become his betrayers and murderers’ (Acts 7.51-52). What is it about God coming into the world that humanity finds so difficult to take?

The church has often spoken of the refusal to recognise, receive, and be transformed by God’s presence simply in terms of human wilfulness. We are naughty, we are bad, we resist God for no good reason. Well, perhaps that is sometimes true: perhaps there are those who are so driven by a will to power, or greed for possessions, or lust for control that they are just merciless, ruthless and culpably self-obsessed.

But for most of us, that’s not how we live or who we are – and maybe even for the Herods of our world there’s a deeper story to be told. So, if it isn’t just sheer bloody-mindedness, what is it about God that humanity finds so hard to take? What is it that we resist about the call to wake up, to dare to trust, to let go of our old ways and be transformed by love?

I think that mostly what's going on is that we are frightened. Herod, our reading says, 'was frightened' by the story the wise men told. We are frightened, and God's presence seems to provoke more fright. Angels always have to preface their conversations with 'Be not afraid'. So what's that about? I suspect it's to do with the magnitude of the transformation we are confronted with – the extent of what must be let go of in ourselves, our identities, our securities, our compromises, our forms of 'business as usual', and all that this process of 'letting go' threatens us with – being laughed at or being misunderstood, being persecuted or condemned, losing a livelihood or our place in community, risking our future on nothing but a dimly discerned promise and the breath of the Spirit. It is a terrible thing, said Jeremiah, to fall into the hands of the living God, the God so radically different from the self-reinforcing deity of domesticated piety. For with this living God nothing can be left quite as it was, especially our religion. 'Do you see these stones', Jesus said to his disciples in front of the temple in Jerusalem: 'not one will remain standing on another'. No wonder, then, that we find it hard to say 'yes' to God; to welcome God's presence into our lives.

But to say 'no', to refuse the journey of transformation – well, that has consequences too. That terrible expression of Herod's fright, the story of the slaughter of the boy children in Bethlehem, is one of the most horrible episodes in the bible. But it is no more monstrous than the story recounted by Etty Hillesum, the Dutch Jew who died in Auschwitz in 1943. Telling of an 'unforgettable night' in a transit camp before a major transportation, she witnesses mothers dressing their children ready for the train journey, the desperate attempts by some to hide their babies, the resigned acceptance of others, the merciless gaze of the guards. 'Small bottles of milk are being prepared to take along with the babies, whose pitiful screams punctuate all the frantic activity in the barracks. A young mother says to me almost apologetically, "My baby doesn't usually cry; it's almost as if he can tell what's

happening”.¹ And Etty writes: ‘The wailing of the babies grows louder still, filling every nook and cranny of the barracks ... It is almost too much to bear. A name occurs to me: Herod’.² And I wonder, where else such things might be happening, even now – in Syria, in the Congo, in the Palestinian Occupied Territories.

Even where the refusal to engage with the journey of transformation does not lead to such monstrous atrocities, it takes other kinds of toll. We might think of lives ‘of quiet desperation’, of homes riven by conflict or abuse, of workplaces where bullying is rampant and power misused. And on we could go and on.

But make no mistake, it *is* hard to say yes to God, to the risk of real love, and to the journey of transformation. It is hard to let go my securities, including the security of the old story of my hurt. It is hard truly to hear the suffering around us, and to be present to it without wanting in some way to silence it. It is hard to entrust myself to an unknown future and to the way of love without vengeance in the midst of violence and threat. For myself, I know that there are people I don’t want to forgive; there are places I don’t want to open my defended heart; there are sufferings around which I don’t want to feel uncomfortable or powerless.

But I do want to live in a world where innocents aren’t slaughtered, where tyrants do not reign, where mercy converts pitilessness. And if I want that, then I must be on the journey towards becoming merciful myself, towards saying yes to love being received in me and flowing through me. How do I do that? I begin simply by noticing where I’m stuck and hurting, where I’m unyielding, ungenerous and afraid. I be with the ‘yuck’ of that, not condemning myself, just attending. And as much as I can, which may not be much at first, I ask for love to make its home in me.

At Christmas, God gives us a gift. But as with so many of God’s gifts, receiving it costs quite a bit. And that stands to reason. If the point of the gift is to invite us to be transformed into God’s own way and to share in God’s reconciling love for the

¹ Etty Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork* (London: Grafton Books, 1988), p.128.

² Hillesum, *Letters from Westerbork*, p.129.

world, then it's obvious that some stuff has to shift in me. Celebrating Christmas means recognising our own fright at the magnitude of its gift, not acting it out, as Herod did, but inviting the gift itself to transform us.

Let us then pray that, for all of us, the love, peace and joy of Christmas comes fully alive in our trembling hearts this year.