

Bearing and Being With: The Work of Love (Luke 1: 26-38)

© Sarah Bachelard

This Advent season at Benedictus we've been exploring the theme, 'The Work of Love in the Face of Doom'. I chose this theme, as you've been hearing, for quite personal reasons. There are times I *feel* a sense of doom – that peculiar mixture of dread and impotence – particularly in relation to the climate crisis and what seems the intractable difficulty of generating sustained and truthful engagement with its challenge. A sense of doom might strike us also, as we think of escalating international tensions and injustice, the proliferation of nuclear weapons and various forms of fundamentalism, as well as the terrors and sorrows of our own lives. Laurence Freeman has remarked that many people these days feel helpless and hopeless as things and values disintegrate around them and the barbarians rule. And the question many are asking is, how do we live well in such a time?

Of course, there are practical things we can do – consume less, for example, waste less, transform how we produce energy and amend the calibre of our public discourse. In this advent season at Benedictus, we've been wondering also about the spiritual labour required or called forth by these crises. We've spoken already of the work of faith and hope. Tonight, I want to focus on the work of love in dark times.

The feast of Christmas offers two powerful icons or images of this work of love. There's the icon of the Christ-child which is an image of radical solidarity – God with us, born as one of us, vulnerable and undefended. And there's the icon of Mary which is an image of radical receptivity. Mary allows, she *bears* love – in all its joy and risk and sorrow. For me, these icons of love, of 'bearing' and 'being with', are endlessly suggestive and nourishing. I think they help us imagine what it means for us to live well here and now.

They speak, first of all, about not running away – neither refusing to enter into the pain of the world, nor seeking to escape what it asks of us. ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son’ – a son born to die. This refusal to run away is a matter of inward as well as outward disposition. What’s central to the characters of Jesus and Mary is their radical availability, their willingness to be whole-heartedly vulnerable to the world’s need, even when they cannot ‘fix’ it. Yesterday afternoon I talked to a friend whose brother is dying – and heard how agonizingly painful it was for her to be with, to bear with his pain, helpless to make it end; and I know of those in communication with refugees on Manus Island, and of marine scientists heartbroken by the tragedy of coral bleaching. How tempting in such contexts to avoid or evade the depth of suffering, how subtle the ways we have of checking out – looking away. But love, the work of love, is about radical availability and real presence.

These icons of love, of Mary and the Christ-child, speak also of seeking not to dominate or control but of being simply responsive to the life of God unfolding in and through them. Gabriel greets Mary as ‘favoured one’ and with seemingly good news: ‘The Lord is with you’. But Mary’s no fool, and she knows that ‘The Lord being with you’ is a risky business: ‘she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be’ (Luke 1: 28-29). Well, she never does see the whole picture, she’s never in control of the story – but she says ‘yes’ anyway, ‘let it be with me according to your word’. Joining the work of love is about giving yourself to it, playing your part, accepting your vocation without demanding to be the centre of the story or in control of the script. This is the vocation of any parent – it’s also, I think, the vocation of us all in these difficult times – the willingness to play our part without knowing how it turns out, without seeing the whole.

And finally, these icons of love, of ‘bearing’ and ‘being with’, speak of perseverance and endurance, of not giving up even when going on looks beyond us. It’s not that we’re immune from experiences of despair or exhaustion ... but somehow, if we’re open to it, the means to go on are given and what seemed

impossible becomes possible after all. Mary bears in her flesh what is seemingly beyond human capacity to bear, 'for nothing will be impossible with God'.

I know many of you have long experience of this work of love in difficult contexts – of not running away, but remaining present, of giving up control and being simply responsive, of not indulging despair but persevering for love's sake. For some it's in the context of a difficult relationship with a child suffering mental illness or disability or addiction, or of a fraught dynamic with a spouse or parent; for some it's in the context of a loved one's illness and dying; for some, it's in the context of your own healing from trauma, depression or self-loathing. There's a felt quality to this ... we know what it's like ...

When we give ourselves to this work of love, there's no guarantee that it will all work out in the end. In his beautiful book, *Love's Endeavour, Love's Expense*, theologian W.H. Vanstone writes of the precariousness of love, which pertains even to the love of God – there's no guarantee love will receive the response for which it yearns. Yet we do know that being in this way joins us to God's way of being, joins us to the love that (in Dante's words) moves the sun and the other stars.

And that means two things. One is that despite its precariousness there is *power* in loving. Love is an action and the more radically and deeply we give ourselves to it, the more our very being becomes a channel for life's creation and renewal. The second is that as love happens, and even in the midst of suffering and darkness, joy can break through – out of nowhere, out of nothing – like the angels singing in the night sky, like life breaking forth from the tomb.

We do live in dark times, in the face of doom – maybe we always do. What then is there to do but to consent to love's conception in our hearts, to en flesh it in our lives, and be surprised by the lightening of our darkness, by the joy of the world?