

A Contemplative Christmas – Promise (Matthew 11. 2-6)

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It's a familiar theme in the Christmas stories – the proclamation that, in Jesus, the long awaited Messiah has come, and God's promise fulfilled. In Luke's gospel, Zechariah, Mary, Simeon and Anna all ecstatically proclaim that God has remembered and made good the oath he swore to their ancestors; Joseph is reassured by the angel that the child conceived in Mary fulfils what had been spoken by the prophets. And in our reading tonight, it is John the Baptist who seeks to know from Jesus that he is the one promised, the 'one who is to come'. In Jesus, the carol says, 'the hopes and fears of all the years are met', and to this fulfilment of promise all the gospel narratives testify.

I have heard many sermons (and preached a few) focusing on the way in which Jesus both fulfils and subverts the expectations of his coming. 'God with us' turns out not to be an all-powerful military king, but a child in a manger. The promise is fulfilled, but in a way that is not expected (hence, presumably, John the Baptist's needing to clarify matters). But what has struck me recently, is not so much the unexpected *manner* of the promise's fulfilment, but the strangeness of the fact that there is a sense of promise at all.

Let's take a moment to consider the implications of this. The texts of our tradition testify that the people of Israel lived out their lives, organised their social belonging and their religious observance, under the auspices of a promise. And this promise was of the coming of a 'saviour', of one who would 'redeem' Israel. It concerned the coming of God's very presence among the people. Now, whether this

sense of promise was 'top of mind' for most people, most of the time is hard to say and possibly it's unlikely. Nevertheless this story of promise formed the imaginative horizon of this community's life. This was the story they told themselves about the nature of ultimate reality and this reality's relationship to them.

Two things strike me about this. First – here is a people who know they need something called 'salvation', 'redemption' – whatever exactly they think this means. Something in their long journey with God has alerted them to an experience of lack or incompleteness or alienation or vulnerability, which out of their own resources they are unable to 'fix'. They are in need of God and they know it. And second – here is a people who have learned to wait upon God, and to live from a stance (often hard-won) of radical trust and expectation of gift. God *is* for them. God's word *will not* return empty. They live in expectancy, not settling for less than the fulfilment they believe they have been promised. And it is this refusal to deny their need or to betray the promise given them that fuels the protest and hope of the prophets, the entreaties of the psalmists and Job's refusal of easy answers and false consolation.

The early church fitted the story of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection into these pre-existing categories of felt need and promised fulfilment. And it seems pretty clear that we can't understand the meaning of Jesus for his contemporaries apart from this interpretive framework. He is the Messiah, the presence of God's deliverance; he is the promised Saviour, who will set his people free.

But what does all this mean for us? We might readily acknowledge a felt sense of need and alienation. It's there in our lives, its symptoms showing up in self-rejection or self-loathing, restlessness, frustration and fearfulness. It's there in our community, in the symptoms of sadness and defeat all around us – random, alcohol fuelled violence, addiction, over-consumption, suicide and self-harm, numbness to injustice and our disconnectedness from creation. How does Christmas help? How does the birth of a

‘saviour’ into the symbol system of an ancient people make a difference for us? How does this supposed fulfilment of promise, the appearance of the ‘one who is to come’, meet our desperate need and ‘save’ us?

Some thoughts. The proclamation of Christmas is that something is given from outside our system, and beyond our capacity to generate. A child is born. An energy of grace appears that gradually transfigure our possibilities from within, revealing the existence of a reality that actively seeks our good, our healing, our redemption. And this appearing of grace, the gift that is given, involves not just an ‘inner’ experience but the practical transformation of our identities and social relationships. The proclamation of the promised salvation is given content by the life Jesus lived. How do we know that the Saviour is come, that God’s grace is present? ‘Go and tell John what you hear and see; the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them’.

None of this means that, because of Christmas, our lives, our relationships, our world will be put right without our participation and commitment. Nothing should remind us of this more profoundly than the life of Nelson Mandela whom the human family grieves and celebrates over these days and who showed us just how costly and forgiving a life must be if it is to contribute to the healing of the world’s wounds. It *does* mean that our longing for justice and restoration, our yearning for reconciliation and wholeness in all parts of our life – all of this resonates with, is in tune with the basic dynamic of reality. And it means that as we risk our lives to participate in this reality, we are met by, empowered by a grace which seems to be not from here and yet at the same time wells up from deep within us. God closer to us than we are to ourselves, as St Augustine says. Christ born in our hearts, as well as in Bethlehem.

The signs of the presence of this grace are (just as Jesus tells John the Baptist) the transfiguration of ordinary life by clearer vision, deeper listening, empowerment for

living, and new possibilities for community and belonging and sharing. What this looks like at any given historical moment can be difficult to discern; and often, its signs are met by incomprehension or resistance from those whose interests are vested in the perpetuation of domination, apartheid, exclusion, injustice, alienation. But the grace, the energy of God's life that takes flesh in Jesus, is the power that undoes these refusals of solidarity and peace – whether in apartheid South Africa or in our country's relationship to indigenous Australians, whether in the refusal by many of our churches to bless same sex love and marriage or in our deafness to the cries of the earth.

God's ancient promise of salvation is, we believe, fulfilled in Jesus – and yet its fulfilment turns out to ask more of us even, than the waiting. For with the fulfilment, the gift of the energy of God's own Spirit within and among us, comes the invitation, the vocation to be ourselves bearers of that salvation in a world that still fears to trust or accept it. Jesus says: 'And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me'. May we, with Nelson Mandela and all the saints, dare to take no offense, dare to risk sharing Jesus' peace in the world, so that we and all God's children may be free.