

CHRISTMAS DAY HOMILY

The Church of St John the Evangelist, Bath 2011.

Readings for Dawn Mass:

Isa. 62:11-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:15-20.

God, they say, is Dead. Mind you, as zealous unbelievers mount their chargers and go after this God, they are often found pursuing one in whom no Christian could believe. They think that we dream of a celestial Superman, a Top Person, bigger than the Prime Minister, or even the Bankers. But that dream has long ago been spotted as an idol, a god of straw. Of course these 'idol' gods can do great damage. I have lived through the lives and deaths of three such pseudo-gods. First, there was the Nazi racist nightmare, then the cruel dictatorship of the Stalinist state and finally we are surely living through the dying days of that pious belief in the 'hidden hand' of the self-regulating market. We do not mourn the passing of these pseudo-gods but, in their dying, they actually sharpen the question of the real God. 'What is all this amazing life for? Why is there anything and not just nothing?' This is the question, which cannot be suppressed. There seems a niggle set deep within us, a 'restlessness' which St Augustine says finds its rest only in that inexhaustible mystery we call 'God'. As a wise Dominican theologian of our time insisted, 'believing in God' is less a matter of coming up with the big clever answer and more a matter of persisting in asking that question 'why?' even when all have given up on it.

For, when the heavenly crowd appeared and the angel spoke, those shepherds were terrified and amazed, but there is no evidence that they were jostled into simple belief. Although piety has then coming down the hillside with little lambs for little Jesus, St Luke says that their reaction was more pragmatic. 'Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.' It is the decision to embark upon a journey of enquiry. And what is there to be seen? The writings of what we call the New Testament are full of efforts to answer that question. St Paul

says that he sees revealed ‘the kindness and love of God’ for mankind. Notice for whom that love is revealed. It is not just for the pious and believing, for Catholics and other Christians, but for all mankind – the whole human race regardless of correct belief or good behaviour. For, the apostle insists, no one has earned this kindness and love. There is no reason for it except ‘God’s own compassion’, that is the ability of this ultimate mystery of the universe, to feel with us tiny human beings – feel with us and for us. The clue we get of such love lies in our experience of being loved by a parent – loved just as we are because it is the nature of parents so to love. So the mystery of God is not that of the Top Person but of exuberant love. And this different picture of God gives us a different picture of our world. Life is no longer a ladder up which we scrabble to get prizes. Life becomes a Gift, the Gift of Kindness and Love, given so that we in turn might find ourselves handing out that same kindness and love to others – of which, I suppose, those presents we give today are tokens and expressions.

But to be honest the truth is that many who try to join the shepherds’ journey of enquiry, find themselves tripped up by institutional religion, by churches. Isaiah may have looked to the People of God as a ‘holy people sought after’, ‘a city not forsaken’, but we know that, at this time, the Catholic Church is not ‘sought after, and is often a city ‘forsaken’. And all this often for understandable reasons, as grim as the abuse of children. The sins of the servants of Church mask the face of God. But still that ‘God nigger’ does not go away. In fact many who have gone on asking that question ‘why?’ have also been those who have wrestled with the sin and failure of religious institutions. Amongst them was the French novelist Georges Bernanos. In one of his works he represents Jesus speaking to the honest reformer.

‘From the beginning my Church has been what it is today, and will be to the end of time, a scandal to the strong, a disappointment to the weak, the ordeal and consolation to those who seek in it nothing but myself. Yes, whoever looks for me

will find me, but they will have to look. I am still more difficult to discover than I was in that little stable at Bethlehem for those who will not approach me humbly, in the footsteps of the shepherds and the magi. But, if you want to find me there, the clever thing is to do as they did on the old road to Judea, and ask for the one thing you need – a star and a pure heart.’

God is dead, they say but then TS Eliot’s Wise men when they came to the manger were left asking
‘Were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a birth certainly’
But they discovered that this birth was
‘Hard and Bitter agony for us, like death, our death.’
For this birth turned their lives upside down. For Shepherds and Magi, all is changed. Shepherds glorify and praise God and tell others their story. The Magi return home by another way.
‘We returned to our Palaces, those Kingdoms
But no longer at ease here in the old dispensation
With an alien people clutching their gods.’

For this God of Kindness and Compassion takes us from our old gods with their world of scrabbling and competing into this new world of exuberant love. And that means something of a dying and a rising.

© Fr Peter Cornwell.
Bath, December 2011.