

Sunday 18 December 2005: Fourth Sunday of Advent

Hanging on a 'yes'

Readings: 2 Sam 7:1-11,16; Luke 1:26-38

Thus says the Lord: I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Moreover the Lord declares to you that the Lord will make you a house. Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.

A couple of weeks ago we moved the sculpture "In the beginning" from the portico into Trafalgar Square. It stands there at the foot of Nelson's column, as our crib for this year. When I first saw it there I was struck at how much smaller and more fragile the baby in stone looked, as compared with its usual place, sheltered by the church. Since it's been in there, I've been astonished by the range of emotions triggered within me by the reactions or non-reactions of the people around the Square. Often as I've walked through, there's been no-one there, as if the baby in stone has merged into anonymity amongst all the surrounding stones that speak of political power and military glory. Then I've found myself wanting to shout loudly "Look, this is the Word-made-flesh, God-with-us, the child born for us. This is what it's all about", but so far I've resisted the temptation to turn inward raging into outward ranting. When there are lots of people around, I've found myself feeling curiously anxious. Last Thursday, as I walked through the square, a large group of children were clambering around it and on to the base of the Nelson's column above it. This time I had to curb my desire to shout "Be careful! Don't hurt him", as I looked on. The final straw came on Thursday evening, when as I walked down St Martin's Lane, I could see waving green neon Santas being projected on to the column above the baby in stone. I can't really explain the feeling of outrage, it provoked in me – but I didn't wave back! I can't explain any of the other feelings, either. I don't worry about the sculpture when it's safely sheltered by the church portico. Why should I feel so differently when it's out there in the world? Perhaps, I've thought to myself, it's something to do with my image of God. Perhaps I don't feel quite so anxious about God when God is safely kept in church – but God exposed to the world, vulnerable to rejection or hurt – well that's a different matter. Out there, the God represented by "in the beginning" seems too small to be noticed. Out there, God isn't big enough to look after himself. Or perhaps I'm being generous to myself – perhaps I'm more worried about God, even a small, vulnerable God being out of control in the world, rather than a God safely within a religious framework I think I understand. Perhaps I'm worried where that small vulnerable God might take me.

Perhaps King David was thinking along similar lines, nearly a thousand years before the birth of Jesus, when he tried to confine God to a building of cedar wood – and all that represented of the nature of the relationship between God and God's people. On paper, David's idea seemed perfectly reasonable. David's position as King was at last secure and established and his dwelling place reflected his power and his glory - the "*the King was settled in his house and the Lord had given him rest from his enemies*" – as the second book of Samuel puts it. And he wasn't just another successful King – he was the Lord's anointed. So it seemed appropriate that the God who had established him David, should also have his power and his glory reflected in a fine dwelling. God been stuck in the tent that had carried the Ark of the Covenant for too long. Now was the time for something much more permanent. God's response to David is to recount the dynamic acts of redemption that he had worked amongst his people Israel - the people that he led out and , redeemed from slavery in Egypt. This God was one who was active among his people. The words that the Lord speaks through the mouth of Nathan the prophet, reflect the nature of a God for who cannot be confined by human structures – whether of stone, or thought, or doctrine.

God turns the tables on David. ‘No’, he says, ‘you will not build me a house, but I will establish a house for you’. God told David that the dwelling place he wanted was a people dedicated to him, a people faithful to the covenant with the Lord. Amongst such a faithful people, God’s dwelling place in hearts and minds would be established as a dynamic, active Kingdom, full of new possibilities and the hope of transformation. Perhaps David’s God had decided that even amidst the uncertainties of a fickle people, he really was big enough to look after himself.

If that is true, then the Gospel reading suggests that God took that possibility and gave it the sort of paradoxical twist that defies all our attempts to categorise, define and keep God safely within a framework we can understand. For it seems that in the story of the Annunciation, God decided that the only way to free himself from all the limitations imposed by centuries of religious practice and political power games was to choose to be bounded by human flesh and blood. And moreover God ratcheted up the risk inherent in this strategy by making it all dependent on an ordinary human ‘yes’.

*“The world’s salvation,
poised
between
summons and reply
hung
on a woman’s word?”*

is how Kenneth Carveley expresses it in his poem “The Annunciation” and as if to heighten the impulsive nature of that divine decision, Carveley continues:

*“Had God no reservations
or reserve in mind,
another choice
another town
a different time
for
highly favoured blessing
or
burdening selectivity?”*

If I worry now about a child in stone, I wonder how Mary felt when the world’s salvation hung on her saying “yes”. If struggle with people’s reaction or non-reaction to a child in stone, I wonder how Mary felt at the scandal and humiliation caused by a child of flesh and blood. “I have not lived in a house ... but I have been moving about in a tent or tabernacle” says God. Hanging on Mary’s “yes” was God’s choice to be a dynamic and ever contemporary presence in the tabernacle of humanity, or a memory confined by the stones of the temple, or the edifice of doctrinal purity (on all sides) or the boundaries of fundamentalist dogma of every complexion. Hanging on Mary’s “yes” was God’s choice of glory through anonymity, power through vulnerability.

And perhaps that’s what alarms me most about that child in stone in the middle of a square dedicated to a very different concept of power and glory. Perhaps it is that it reminds me all too forcibly of the cost of power through vulnerability, of glory through anonymity; it speaks to me all too clearly of what hangs on my “yes” and on the “yes” of each one of us.

“This child must be born
that the kingdom might come:
salvation for many,

destruction for some;
both end and beginning,
both message and sign;
both victor and victim,
both your and divine'

No payment was promised,
no promise made;
no wedding was dated,
no blueprint displayed.
Yet Mary, consenting
to what none could guess,
replied with conviction,
"Tell God, I say yes".

(John Bell, Iona Community)