

Sunday 24 December 2006: Fourth Sunday of Advent

Richard Dawkins, Unselfishness and Worship

Micah 5.2-5a; Luke 1.39-45

Gosh, I am fed up with Richard Dawkins. For those who don't know he is Britain's best known atheist, and hugely popular at the moment. Much to my annoyance, I found myself thinking about him during Nine Lessons and Carols on Wednesday night. It was during the second reading, which was the one about the Fall, from the *second* creation story in Genesis, which in itself is a pretty good clue that what we are dealing with here is not a scientific account of creation.

The man and the woman hid from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. When the Lord called the man he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." I wondered whether Dawkins' could describe in scientific terms anything like as well what it feels like to be human, having done something wrong and experiencing shame, guilt and blaming others?

There's a wonderfully strident attack on Dawkins in a recent (19 October 2006) issue of *The London Review of Books* by Terry Eagleton, Professor of English Literature at Manchester University and usually labelled a Marxist, and therefore no particular friend of Christianity. It begins,

Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology....

Dawkins considers that all faith is blind faith, and that Christian and Muslim children are brought up to believe unquestioningly. Not even the dim-witted clerics who knocked me about at grammar school thought that. For mainstream Christianity, reason, argument and honest doubt have always played an integral role in belief.

It's high time someone other than theologians and Christians took Dawkins to task for sloppy thinking, no matter how engaging a communicator he seems to be. One of his earliest and most interesting books was called *The Selfish Gene*. Rowan Williams commented that the title is a sort of category mistake. Genes don't have self-consciousness so how is it appropriate to call them selfish? Anyway, Dawkins' point was that selfishness is built in to our nature as a survival strategy. Being human and gaining a sense of moral responsibility is to get beyond this and live not just for ourselves but with regard for others. According to Dawkins, this heightened sense of consciousness – which in Christianity is expressed by 'Do unto others as you would have them do to you' and 'love your neighbour as yourself' - is good for our survival so it, too, is enlightened self interest and, in the end, essentially selfish.

Here he seems entirely to miss an aspect of being human because of that crashing shift of gear in which he moves from a statement about evolutionary biology to one about moral philosophy. He assumes that, in the end, we are only self-interested. Other scientists at the moment emphasise not the selfishness of each species but our

interdependence and the need for bio-diversity: we need each other and one of our deepest fears is that human selfishness might be destroying the planet and our own chance for survival.

Today's readings speak a different truth about being human in poetic and imaginative ways. After all the great history of God's people Israel, Micah foretells the Messiah will be born in... Bethlehem. Like the young boy David, chosen to fight the Philistine giant Goliath, the city of David lacked... significance. It wasn't the biggest or the best, but it was chosen, as if God's work can be seen more easily in weakness than in strength.

Our ecumenical church leaders' pilgrimage to Bethlehem this week provided a strikingly similar example. As one of the group, the Archbishop of Canterbury said that the war in Iraq has had a negative impact on Christians in the Middle East.

[He said that,

factors such as reaction to the war in Iraq, mistrust from surrounding communities and security measures have combined to put intolerable pressure on Christians in countries across the region including Iraq, Iran, the Holy Land, Egypt and Turkey, to the point where many are migrating away from their homelands.

The Times 23.12.06]

The Archbishop of Canterbury is not the most significant player in the politics of the Middle East but the Foreign Office immediately issued a rebuttal. Yet the Archbishop *was* speaking truth to power, as it were giving voice to little Bethlehem, its Christian communities enclosed behind that monstrous wall where fear breeds fear and no way out of the spiral of violence.

God's extraordinary intervention 2,000 years ago was not through the strong and powerful but in Bethlehem,

one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel

Micah 5.2

It is the same pattern with Mary, the unlikely young girl from Nazareth, whose response to the angel is at the heart of Christian proclamation, and is depicted in mosaics on either side of the sanctuary.

My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant...

Luke 1.47,48

It's a vision of the world turned upside down, not at all as expected, but one that breathes new life and possibility into creation.

His mercy is for those who fear him...
He has scattered the proud...
Brought down the powerful...
Lifted up the lowly...
Filled the hungry...

And sent the rich empty away.
Luke 1.50-53

For those of us gathered in church on Christmas Eve, waiting with expectation for the coming of Christ, how can we prepare ourselves to respond like Mary, like Bethlehem, to the surprise of God in our midst?

Lots of people don't 'get' worship, certainly Richard Dawkins doesn't. Asked what he thought of eminent scientists who are also Christian he said that he simply doesn't understand them. Unselfishness characterises the Christian ideal and it's in worship, as we learn to attend to God with each other, that we are moved from our self-centredness and selfishness to be centred on God, open to God's will, and able to respond like Mary to the angel, "let it be with me according to your word".

When I became Vicar here eleven years ago, Fr Ken Leech sent me a small card which I have had on my notice board ever since. Referring to one of the Beatitudes with just the right balance of threat and humour it simply says:

The meek are getting ready.

As the angels sang,

Glory be to God on high and on earth peace among those whom he favours.

Luke 2.14