

Sunday 20 December: Fourth Sunday of Advent

Finding the language for God in Jesus

Readings: Hebrews 10.5-10; Luke 1.39-45

This is the time of year when we hear the very different ways in which the four Gospels begin their accounts of who Jesus is and what his significance might be for us.

John sets Jesus in cosmological history:

“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Mark starts with a statement: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God”. He sets it in fulfilment of the Scriptures: “As it is written in the prophet Isaiah. John the Baptizer appeared... In those days Jesus came from Nazareth and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” And immediately we are into the adult life and ministry of Jesus.

Matthew begins with the family tree, “of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham”. It is the most evidently Jewish of the Gospels. There is a pattern and a promise in the history of Israel. “So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations and from David to the deportation to Babylon are fourteen generations, and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah are fourteen generations.” It is as foretold but not as expected, and Matthew draws attention to some wonderful surprises, like the women who are among the mothers of Israel.

The genealogy of Matthew is a poem and Michael Goulder, a New Testament scholar, comments on its significance in the form of a poem:

Exceedingly odd is the means by which God
Has provided our path to the heavenly shore
Of the girls from whose line the true light was to shine.
There was one an adulteress, another a whore.
There was Tamar who bore what we all should deplore
A fine pair of twins to her father in law,
And Rahab the harlot, her sins were as scarlet,
As red as the thread that she hung from the door,
Yet alone of her nation she came to salvation
And lived to be mother of Boaz of yore,
And he married Ruth, a gentle uncouth,
In a manner quite counter to biblical lore,
And of her there did spring David the King
Who walked on his palace one evening and saw
The wife of Uriah, from whom he did sire
A baby that died — yes, and princes a score:
And a mother unmarried it was too that carried
God's son, and laid him in a manger of straw,
That the moral might wait at the heavenly gate
While the sinners and publicans go in before
Who have not earned their place, but received it by grace,
And have found them a righteousness not of the law.

Luke wants to set down an orderly account of events, setting out a history. His Gospel is the most obviously written for Gentiles. Luke's story, so familiar to us, is also full of surprises: God's son born away from the centre of religious and political power in Jerusalem, to a teenage girl, yet to be married; away from home, among the poor and lowly. The first to come and worship were from the hillsides, out of town. The shepherds would not have been able to keep ritual purity laws so they would have been viewed with suspicion; the second hand car dealers of their day! This Prince of Peace was born for all the earth. He becomes a threat to Herod and the men of power.

What we heard in today's Gospel from Luke was the charming story of Mary visiting her cousin Elizabeth. "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb'." (Luke 1.42) John the Baptist, is presented by Luke as from the same family, the second cousin of Jesus, who from before he was born pointed to Jesus as the Messiah. I don't think John the Baptist would have such a place within the Gospels if he were simply announcing Jesus. That there was a perceived rivalry means a conflict had to be sorted out and the relationship between the two settled effectively. John leaps in the womb in delighted recognition of his Lord. He sends his disciples to see the works of Jesus: the sick are healed, the deaf hear, the prisoner freed, the lame leap, and the dumb sing for joy in fulfilment of the prophet Isaiah (chapter 35).

For each of the Gospel writers, this Jesus requires new thinking, new understanding. It is a new way of thinking in response to new circumstances. First the experience was lived. It created conflict and division as well as life and hope. Because it was important and took root, the followers of Jesus told stories preached about the significance of his life, death and resurrection. They needed a language and used the religious structure of Israel to try to say clearly who he is and what he does. Today's Epistle from Hebrews is as opaque as they come. You know you are in trouble in church when a Bible reading begins, "Consequently..."! In Hebrews, Jesus is the one, eternal sacrifice. In a way, by restoring our relationship with God in such personal terms, he has exploded the category. We are at the edge of meaning. New language is needed.

One of the good things about the Common Worship liturgy which the Church of England has been using since 2000 is the material which helps mark the year. In this Eucharist in Advent we've been using a different Affirmation of Faith, one based on the Athanasian Creed. It has drawn quite a lot of comment this December. Like any creed it comes out of controversy. It probably has nothing to do with Athanasius himself, who was bishop of Alexandria on the Egyptian Mediterranean coast and died in 373. The creed which became attached to his name was written in Latin and addressed the heresies that were the hot topic for the Church in the fifty or so years after he died. What matters, this Creed says, is that Jesus is at once both human and divine, not as it were two persons mixed in one body.

Although he is both divine and human
He is not two beings but one Christ.
One not by turning God into flesh
But by taking humanity into God;
Truly one, not by mixing humanity with Godhead,
But by being one person.

The Athanasian creed is not a very obvious thought form and language for us now, and you might wonder why it matters. It is simply that it's the best people could do to say who Jesus is and why he matters. The stories and the Gospels, the preaching and the creeds combine with our experience to help us engage with God through Jesus Christ in the here and now.

Although there's something deep within us that asks for the familiar well loved story to be told time and time again, experience tells us that the implications of this story are inexhaustible. What else could happen when the infinite intersects with time, 'eternity shut in a span'? We can never say it perfectly but it matters so much to us individually and together, that we are constantly trying to do it and say it better.

Last week, St Martin's played a small part in the final programme of Diarmaid Macculloch's TV series on a History of Christianity. Professor Macculloch's point was that a world religion has to adapt to changing circumstances in order to remain meaningful and true. St Martin's was his example of a Western European parish church that has done exactly that. He said that the biggest problems facing the Church today are in relation to gender and sexuality. He touched on the ordination of women and same sex relationships. The bit that was filmed here was recorded 2 years ago. Watching it last week, I had the sense that we have already moved on. The issues of climate change, of economic development and the ways in which we belong together on this fragile earth seem considerably more important. We are likely to hear Jesus addressing the faithful religious leaders of his day when he said,

"Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practised without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel!" (Mt 23.23-4)

I don't mean that the Church as a whole has moved on. Indeed, you might say the Church as a whole has got stuck in relation to the major changes that have taken place in our society. The consequence is a series of earthquakes because the tectonic plates of the Church have not been moving steadily and a build up of tension suddenly rips the surface as a gay bishop is elected in the US. But adjust we will because the world has moved on and in a new context the Church will want to remain meaningful and true.

At the front of the Hard Rain book produced by Mark Edwards to go with the exhibition of photos currently on the railings outside St Martin-in-the-Fields about the impacts of climate change, there is an uncomfortable quote from Albert Einstein:

"You cannot solve the problem with the same kind of thinking that has created the problem."

At the end of the Copenhagen summit, maybe we are a little further on understanding the problem and its implications but we haven't yet found the new way of thinking and acting.

The Christian Church has wonderful resources to apply from its repeated experience of setting out on a journey in faith, in love and with hope. This is the pattern of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel, of the prophets, of Joseph and Mary, the God-bearer. It means this Christmas story is not one to which we just look back with nostalgia. It is a story that points us forward, longing for completeness, to the coming of God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.