

CHRISTMAS EVE MIDNIGHT MASS 2008

Isaiah 52:7-12, Heb 1:1-4, John 1:1-14

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation....

Tonight, we remind ourselves once again that our Saviour has been born. Most of us have heard this story before. We may even have been Mary, a sheep or a star at various times. The characters may be as worn out in our mind as those Christmas tree decorations that we decided finally to throw away. And it is all rather childish, this story of virgin birth and God become man. Good enough for children, perhaps, but for at least 70% of adults in the UK, unbelievable, according to a recent poll¹.

It does not help that it is hard to see where any Saviour has been at work. We have had –let us face it- a bad year. As an editorial in the Lancet says: “2008 is turning out to be the kind of year one is heartily glad to see the back of.”

We need a 21st century Saviour

- Who can prevent natural disasters: earthquakes in China or the floods in southeast Asia.
- Who could stitch up the hole in the ozone layer, now at its second largest size in history, or who could re-ice the Arctic, which has only once been as thin as it is now.
- And a guerrilla-warrior who could swiftly wrap up the conflicts of Iraq –where perhaps 1 million people have already died- and Afghanistan, which has claimed 30,000 deaths so far.....
- We then need a great diplomat, who could balm the open political sores of Somalia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo,
- And who could winkle Mugabe out of Zimbabwe, and rush in medical aid to those thousands at risk of death from cholera
- And a financial guru, who could rescue the Western economies from the domino insecurity of the credit crunch.... Who could bring back Woolies, MFI and Zavvi.
- And someone who could feed the 30,000 children who die each **day** of hunger worldwide
- And a poet could breathe back joy into the lives of the children of the UK who, we learnt last year from Unicef, are the unhappiest children in the Western world.

¹ A poll of 1,000 people by the British Marketing Research Bureau for St Helen's Church in Bishopsgate, London, December 2008.

We need an artist, warrior, diplomat, scientist, financier Saviour. Now that would be impressive. We could believe in that. That would make sense.

But a Baby? What use is that.....?

The writer of Hebrews reminds us that God has intervened before in our world “in many and various ways”. One time, he raised up just such a monumental person as we might need now: King David, who ruled over Judah and Israel for forty years. A killer of bears and lions, a poet, dancer and musician, a guerrilla fighter, military commander, statesman, and law maker. He made Jerusalem his capital and set up a mighty empire... and his people flourished.

But, “it happened, late one afternoon, when David was walking about on the roof of the king's house, that he saw from the roof a woman bathing; the woman was very beautiful.”². Lust led to adultery, a pregnancy and a murder.

Isn't that just inevitable? David Owen, the former Foreign Secretary, has written interestingly this year of sickness amongst political leaders³ and in particular has described their susceptibility to a “hubris syndrome” where they become disconnected from ordinary behaviours, and imagine themselves invincible, all-knowing, freed from normal morals

Is that not just part of what it is to be human? In the end, does not our pride, greed or aggression corrode our best intentions and make us all no better than Bernard Madoff and his pyramid scam, or those soldiers at Abu Ghraib... are those not the *alpha and omega* of those little weaknesses we experience within ourselves every day?

And so, we should not be surprised if God chooses not to raise up again a Superhuman, but to do something much more subtle, interstitial and –ultimately- powerful. Not to create a new David to reign for 40 or 400 years. But to act for all time, absolutely.

² 2 Samuel 11 ff

³ In Sickness and in Power: Illness in Heads of Government During the Last 100 Years
by David Owen

The nativity story is not about a baby in the manger.....

It is a brand new way for God to communicate with his people. He sends not a child, but the very being or thing that was present when the World was created.

As the prophet Amos puts it: this Creator is, “the one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night, who calls for the waters of the sea, and pours them out on the surface of the earth”.⁴ *The Word was in the beginning and the Word became flesh and lived among us.*

Our creator came to rescue us, to drive away the darkness of our world, not with power or might, or political wile.... But with light: through transformed relationships, through intimate encounters, through –ultimately – an invitation: *“to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God”.*

This God has come, not with strategies and principles to guide institutions and nations, not with meta-narratives or complex political algorithms, but with one overriding message:

As Rowan Williams wrote in the Telegraph:

“The God of the Christmas story ... doesn't relate to us on the basis of any theory but on the basis of unconditional love and welcome..... loving God and one another is a defiance of all programmes and principles designed to preserve only the wellbeing of people like us.”

This baby is not for primary schools, but for board rooms and cabinet meetings, for the prison cell and terrorist bunker, for the geologist and for the economist. He is our saviour, dragging us away from the inevitable darkness of our humanity into the light, rescuing us with his *“glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.”*

Isaiah 52:7-12,

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of

⁴ Amos 5:8

our God. Depart, depart, go out from there! Touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of it, purify yourselves, you who carry the vessels of the Lord. For you shall not go out in haste, and you shall not go in flight; for the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.

Heb 1:1-4

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.