

If You Care Don't Let 'Em Know?

Christmas Day 2007

All Saints' Cathedral Wakefield

What's Christmas all about? What's it *really* about? I guess if you went round with a microphone and TV camera by Burger King, BHS, or Costa Coffee, just outside here you'd get some fairly rum answers. I rather like this versified answer from Australia. It's called Tangmalangaloo. It has a rather severe clergyman interrogating an apparently heathen youngster, and getting a reply he didn't bargain for:

“Come, tell me, boy, the bishop said in crushing tones
severe,
Come tell me why is Christmas Day the greatest of the
year?
How is it that around the world we celebrate that day
And send a name upon a card to those who're far away?
Why is it wandering ones return with smiles and greetings
too?”
A squall of knowledge hit the lad from Tangmalangaloo.

He gave a lurch which set a-shake the vases on the shelf,
He knocked the benches all askew, up-ending of himself.
And oh, how pleased his lordship was, and how he smiled
to say,
“That's good my boy. Come tell me now; and what is
Christmas Day?”
The ready answer bared a fact no bishop ever knew –
“It's the day before the races at Tangmalangaloo.”

Not only was the bishop ignorant of these races, it was certainly not the answer he expected, nor indeed was looking for! I can imagine equally wacky answers from our interviewer outside Burger King. For some it's the day the clubs don't open in Wakefield. Others – nearer to my age – might answer the day before Debenham's (or in the old days Schofields) sale in Leeds. For some it's one of those awkward days when there are no trains or buses.

How far off the target could one be? Or are they? Dig a bit deeper and they have hit it 'spot on' as people now say. For the drama of *today* is about God caught up to the neck in the mess which is human life. Think of the images: Your new baby stuck in some dirty straw – what about all those allergies? Post natal experience amidst a load of cow and sheep dung – untold germs! And all this down wind from the noise, smoke (although not since July 1st!) and drunkenness of the next door pub. It makes the races at Tangmalangaloo sound positively civilised, if not quite religious. Of course, this morning's readings don't quite tell it in such gory messy detail. We had no stable, no shepherds, no wise men.

Instead we had something far more abstract, almost mystical. Listen briefly again. For it is still the story of Jesus entering on to the world stage:

‘He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful ... in these last days God has spoken to us by a Son.’

And then that remarkable gospel:

‘And the Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth.’

These phrases seem to be a world away from Burger King, Debenhams, Costa Coffee and Tangmalangaloo. But wait a minute. Listen to a bit more of that gospel:

‘He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not. He came to his own home, and his own people received him not.’

Now we find God well embroiled in the mess, and rejected too.

Earlier in the year I was putting together some thoughts about Christian vocation. What does it mean to be a Christian? I began here - with God in our mess, God caught up in the human tragedy. A rather dated popular song came to mind by Joni Mitchell. In it she reflects on the ambiguities of life. So, clouds can be beautiful – *bons and floms of angel hair, feathered canyons, ice cream castles in the air*. Or they can rain on us, block the sun and so on. But some later verses are the crucial ones:

‘Moons and Junes and Ferris wheels
The dizzy dancing way you feel
As ev’ry fairy tale comes real –
I’ve looked at love that way.

But now it’s just another show
You leave ‘em laughing when you go
And if you care, don’t let ‘em know –
Don’t give yourself away.’

That is a fundamental mark of our humanity. Preserve our guile, our self-respect, our inner world. Don’t be vulnerable, if you care don’t let them know. Don’t give yourself away.

But that is just the sort of God who comes amongst us in Jesus. In coming amongst all our mess, he *did* let us know. A sign of his care was to become as vulnerable as us. The helpless baby and the stricken one on the cross describe our God. The answer to that crusty Antipodean bishop from Tangmalangaloo is that – our God is a God who gives himself away.

That is not only the greatest message of salvation but an enormous challenge to everyone of us. How shall we become vulnerable? How in this coming year shall we let others know? How as a nation can we do this? As one of the richest nations on earth what shall we do for the poorest? Our link here with Mara in Tanzania never lets that challenge go away. But it’s also a challenge to politicians and political parties. How shall we let others know?

Our God gives himself away. He did so supremely on this day and on Good Friday. How shall *we* do it? How shall I give *myself* away?

Amen

Readings:

Hebrews 1.1-4

John 1.1-14