

Hope in *this* World

a sermon preached at

Christ's Mass

Feast of the Incarnation

25 December 2007

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lections: Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

Is there hope in *this* world, or not? That's the \$64,000 question which fascinates, in equal measure, science, religion, psychology and philosophy. In a recent spirited conversation with a 20 year old I noticed how powerfully the global climate debate fuels a negative answer to that question. An open-eyed, intelligent and scientific assessment of two modern phenomena – global warming and rampant consumption – readily lead our children to a profoundly pessimistic outlook for planet earth. Ironically, Al Gore's successful campaigning may have also fuelled a rise in the dark vision for humankind's future which, for the sake of simplicity, can best be described under the heading 'apocalyptic'. At Centennial Pool last week I was greeted by a very large billboard advertising the soon-to-be-released *Aliens versus Predator* movie, which cheerily promises that 'This Christmas there'll be no peace on earth'. That neatly sums up the apocalyptic imagination - there will be no peace on earth. Great! In the apocalyptic imagination there is no hope in this world, there is only a reality to be endured, a battle and the struggle to overcome its darkness, and the hope of ultimate escape from it.

Is there hope in this world, or not? Tonight's great feast is a resounding 'Yes!' Our flickering candles penetrating the night are our 'Yes!' to God's 'Yes!' But the problem for us is that the apocalyptic imagination is a very old friend, millennia old, tremendously potent, still stalking us in our dreams and in Hollywood movies, was clearly a matter of some considerable struggle in the early christian community, and remains so. Apocalypticism always breeds in the minds of those who are impatient or disappointed with the current state of affairs, and with those who have adopted a generally negative attitude towards the created order. A flat-earth interpretation of Genesis chapter 3 and the doctrine of 'original sin' readily leads to an attitude towards humans which concludes that all flesh is sinful and bad. If one adopts that kind of stance, then one is bound to look to the day when this 'nasty and sinful world' comes to an end, so that those who are pure and righteous can get their reward.

The curious thing is that even those who would be unconscious of the sophisticated theological and philosophical arguments to support the apocalyptic view can nevertheless be gripped by this imagination. Perhaps because there's a certain 'common sense-ness', neatness and tidiness about it, and certainly a very demonstrable political potency. Furthermore, it is a way of dealing with existential disappointment with one's life and the world in general. Hope is transferred to another, supposedly better, world. Hope consists in making right moral choices (though it's usually only the sexual ones which excite any real attention), and in believing the right things, in order to be rescued from this 'veil of tears', from what is regarded as a sinful and fundamentally evil world. Hope lies in convincing the deity that you are good enough to not be blow-torched in order to make it to the 'better place'. Hope, under the tyranny of the apocalyptic imagination, may *talk about* God being loving, but actually depends on being very afraid.

Is there hope in this world, or not? Tonight's glorious feast is a resounding 'Yes!' 'Yes!' to this earth, and 'Yes!' to humankind. "To you was born this day a saviour, who is **Χριστος** *Christos* the Lord." ¹ The word *Christos* is the Greek rendering of the Hebrew word **מָשִׁיחַ** *Meshiach* Messiah. Israel's hope became invested in a messiah, who would usher in longed-for peace in the ancient middle eastern world. Unfortunately - in spite of Isaiah's image of the child who is 'Prince of Peace'² - this hope for peace and prosperity remained thoroughly tribalistic in which all the rest of the nations on earth would either join Israel or be annihilated.

¹ Luke 2:11

² Isaiah 9:6

So this messianic hope was also thoroughly violent, because, like an Arnold Swarzenegger movie, or like a thousand other apocalyptic Hollywood movies, the apocalyptic messiah's method for sorting out the world required a lot of killing. So there *appeared* to be hope in this world, but it was always thwarted by an expectation that was limited to the tribally-few, the religiously and ideologically pure, and necessitated wholesale slaughter to usher it in. In truth, the apocalyptic imagination and its saviour does *not* have hope in this world. Certainly no hope in this world as a whole and integral entity, nor in humankind as a single organic body.

So is there hope in *this* world, or not? The resounding answer of Christ's Mass is 'Absolutely yes!' Incarnation rejects the old tribalistic and violent apocalypticism. "Do not be afraid, for see – I am bringing you good news [εὐαγγέλιον *evangelion*] of great joy which will be to *all* the people." ³ Christ's Mass is to be encountered here, on this earth, in this ordinary and yet glorious human matter. "She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in an animal feeding trough." ⁴ Christ's Mass is the declaration that ordinary matter, human flesh, is the home of God: "Look, the young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us'." ⁵ Christ's Mass is the affirmation of God's love for matter, for flesh. "God is not ashamed," the Archbishop of Canterbury has reminded us in his Christmas letter, "to be called [our] God." ⁶ The Christ revolution completely rejects the dark and violent apocalyptic imagination. Hope is to be found here, in this earth, among humans, in the ordinariness of flesh, in matter.

Is there hope in this world, or not? Christ's Mass is God's 'Yes!' and our joyful 'Yes' in the material and sensual response of song, lights, incense, gifts representing ourselves, bread and wine. The doctrine of incarnation is the christian insight and affirmation that this world and all its matter *is* the zone and locus of hope – God is *with us!* The Kingdom of heaven is near. ⁷ There *is* hope in the earth, in flesh, in matter!

Though there is a critical qualification to the christian hope in this world - not hope in matter as possession or commodity or mere instrument. Hope in this world of that kind is, in truth, hope in the ascendancy and the self-sufficiency of the human ego, which leads only to self-centredness, denounced time and again by Mary's child. True hope in this world and its matter is the very means by which we are invited to see the Divine who resides in it and our proper place as created beings. Which means that matter, this world, is the fiery and glorious and humbling and grounding means by which we become like Christ, fully human and fully divine. "Without [matter], without your onslaughts, without your uprootings of us, we should remain all our lives inert, stagnant, puerile, ignorant of both ourselves and of God. You who batter us and then dress our wounds, you who resist to us and yield to us, you who wreck and build, you who shackle and liberate, the sap of our souls, the hand of God, the flesh of Christ: it is you, matter, that I bless." ⁸

Is there hope in *this* world? Absolutely! God is *with us!* Emmanuel, supremely expressed in the matter of the Body of Christ. God's total affirmation to *this* earth, expressed in the gift of Jesus' body – in the frail flesh in the arms of a poor young woman in Egyptian exile, in the sacrificial flesh on a Roman execution machine outside Jerusalem, in the eucharistic flesh and blood at this and every altar of Christ, in the sacrificial, eucharistic lives of you and me, of *all human flesh*. In tonight's great sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood we affirm and celebrate with Christ *this* world, this mysterious, excruciating, exquisite, ordinary and astonishingly-beautiful matter of *our* bodies and of this earth. In the sacrament of God's incarnating, of the Word-made-flesh, we encounter the hope in which *all things* have their being in God and without whom nothing has its being, ⁹ and in whom all matter is composed and exists. ¹⁰

Tonight's feast is the resounding answer to our question: Is there hope in *this* world? "And the Word became flesh and lived among us... and gave power to become children of God," ¹¹ "[that] those who eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood [will] have eternal life," ¹² "[who] came that all may have life and have it abundantly," ¹³ "so that God may be all things in all." ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among people of good will." ¹⁵

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³ Luke 2:10

⁴ Luke 2:7

⁵ Matthew 1:23

⁶ Hebrews 11:16 'Christmas Message from the Archbishop of Canterbury', Anglican Communion News Service, <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/2007/12/14/ACNS4353>

⁷ Matthew 4:17

⁸ Teilhard de Chardin P, *Hymn of the Universe*, London: Fontana, 1970, p64.

⁹ John 1:3

¹⁰ Colossians 1:17 **συνεστηκεν** *synestēken* 'to be composed', 'to exist', 'to be' 'to associate', 'to commend' NRSV: "to be held together"

¹¹ John 1:14, 12

¹² John 6:53-54

¹³ John 10:10

¹⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:28

¹⁵ Luke 2:14