

The Unknown One Among Us

a sermon preached on the

3rd Sunday in Advent

14 December 2008

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lecture: Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8,19-28

Why do we wait without seeing?

Watching. Waiting. Hoping. We desire to live with expectation and hope, and sometimes even do. But why does it feel as though we spend many years watching and waiting without seeing? The best we can manage, much of the time, is to not lose hope in the face of the overwhelming facts which surround us on every side. To not become bitter or resentful or cynical or dispirited or despairing – that may sometimes feel as much as we can manage.

Why does it feel as though we spend the best years of our lives watching and waiting, but without seeing? This was the burning question of the early church, so convinced was it that Christ's second coming would take the shape they had in mind, during their own lifetime. The apparent failure of Christ to come again while they were still alive forced St Paul, in particular, to revise the early church's theology of second coming – and St John the Divine revised it even more radically after him.

Why does it feel as though we spend the best years of our lives watching and waiting, but without seeing? This feels like a heavy burden for we who attempt to remain faithful to our calling as the baptised. Without doubt, this is a matter of suffering, for which premature resolution is always a possible option, chosen by many people, I suspect, as a way of staving off the suffering which faith inevitably entails.

I sometimes dread parties and other social occasions, not only because of the superficiality and dishonesty, but also because I am well and truly over the lectures I get when people discover that I am a church-attender. At a recent party the man I was sat next to gave me a very long lecture on what he believed about God and Jesus and Mary. His lecture, based on absolute convictions, included articles of belief about the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, the doctrine of God, and the divinity of Christ. It goes without saying that he actually knows nothing whatsoever of the theological subtlety of these doctrines, let alone their symbolic significance for psychology, anthropology, politics, economics, and so on. But that certainly did not hold him back! As most do, he liberally scattered throughout his monologue the word 'belief' – I believe this, and don't believe that, and so on. What I found myself wanting to say in response to his tyrannical monologue – but restrained myself out of respect for the party atmosphere – is 'Who cares what you believe!' Frankly, a much more interesting question which I would like to have asked my dinner companion is this: "Who are you? What is the meaning of your life?"

Such occasions are tedious and depressing because, over a few drinks and in the context of the superficiality of the party atmosphere, there is never the possibility of real and meaningful dialogue. Such encounters are not dialogues at all, in fact, but invariably tyrannical monologue. What makes such encounters so painful, of course, is being reminded about my own tyrannical monologue.

Who cares what we believe? We have such an over-valued attitude towards the notion of belief. As though reality consists entirely in what people believe. You see, what makes my monologue of stated beliefs tyrannical

is that it narrows down existence to a collection of thoughts floating around in my head. Beliefs function like the walls of a tunnel, a tight and constraining container from which it is possible to see in only one direction.

We should not forget that it was belief which made it impossible for the Jerusalem church to accept the inclusion of Gentiles. Belief is what made it impossible for Pope Urban VIII to accept what Galileo revealed to the world of the 17th century. Belief is what still makes it impossible for some Christians to accept the equal humanity and full inclusion of blacks, Jews, gays and sundry other scapegoated minorities. Lest we fall for that old prejudice of imagining that only so-called religious people are so tunnel-visioned, to cite but one famous example, committed belief in a static cosmos is what made it impossible for the great Einstein to accept that the cosmos is expanding, prompting him to invent something called the 'cosmological constant' in order to make the equations work, which late in life he confessed to be the greatest blunder of his life. ¹

It is because of this narrowing of vision, this tightly constrained belief-defined way of seeing the world that even though the Baptist declared to the Pharisees that there was a much greater one than him standing among them, whose sandal thong John was not worthy enough to untie, they were unable to see him. Belief is what John the Baptist recognises in his Pharisee audience. They may seem to enquire as to who John is, but they already know the answer which is acceptable to their belief. Their belief is the reason why though one who is among them whose sandal thong they are certainly not worthy to untie, they cannot see him.

That, in a nutshell, is the potential threat to the birth of Christ in us which Advent's third Sunday warns us about. Watching and waiting we may be. Expectant and hopeful we may be. Nevertheless, as signalled by last week's gospel, our experience of this coming-to-birth is disorienting, terrifying, disempowering. We only wake up in wilderness, which by definition destabilises us and steals from us, like the thief in the night, all our certainties, which is like a fire that dissolves all our elements. And in the midst of this fire which is a coming to birth, the greatest threat is our belief. This may seem paradoxical to those of us who have worked so hard to believe, and for whom belief has offered the way to salvation. Yet it is our belief which prevents us from seeing, in the midst of the fire, the one who is already among us, within us. It is our tyrannical and tunnel-visioned belief which prevents us from seeing.

So Advent 3 is like a warning, an alert to the danger. If we wish to see the Lord then we will have to be willing to allow the baptism in water which washes away our tyrannical, tunnel-visioned belief, in order that we may have the faith required to see the One in our midst, the One who is coming to birth within us, within our chaotic, confused and uncertain lives.

Perhaps we feel this is too overwhelming a task? We are not alone. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses and companions on the way. It is into exactly such a state of affairs that St Paul encouraged the church at Thessalonica: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you... May the God of peace sanctify you entirely, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." ²

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¹ Ferguson K, *The Fire in the Equations: Science, Religion, and the Search for God*, Philadelphia: Templeton Foundation Press, 1994, p92.

² 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, 23