

The Silence of Gestation

a sermon preached on the

4th Sunday in Advent

21 December 2008

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lecture: 2 Samuel 7:1-11,16; Romans 16:25-27; Luke 1:26-38

Baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ is accompanied by the responsibility to share the good news, the gospel, of Christ. There's no avoiding that evangelical fundamental principle, without which there is no church. However, under the influence of hubris this sound principle gives rise to the very common unsound phenomenon of Christians indiscriminately broadcasting to all and sundry their experiences. We've all been on the receiving end of such broadcasts. I regret having made a few such unsound broadcasts myself.

In fact, there's little difference between the sales pitch for cars, mobile phones and fashion accessories, and the sales pitch for religious experience. In all cases the underlying dynamic is our need to feel in control, and the exploitation of desire – 'I want what s/he's got.' Desire is one of the most powerful forces in the universe, a fact which every marketing person knows and exploits. All of us can be convinced that we must have what that person over there has, that we must look like and live like them. The potency of this desire to mimic fuels mass consumption. This fact alone means that even the best of efforts to reduce, reuse and recycle will make little difference, since such efforts ignore the driving desire to acquire and possess in the first instance. Only by coming to grips with desire can any true transformation come about.

So selling religion by massaging desire is bound to lead down a blind alley, for both the seller and the buyer. Those who are successful at selling are at grave risk of hubris, that inflation of the ego which results from the feeling of being able to exercise some control over the religious marketplace. Those who buy the religious product or idea are at grave risk of attempting to force upon their souls ideas and practices which do not naturally arise from within them. The religious product itself lacks authenticity because it is in truth a still-born intuition. The intuition upon which it is based is, of course, good in itself. But reducing the intuition to a manageable, saleable, marketable and packageable commodity is like premature birth, or still birth even. Advent's fourth Sunday shows us how we may be spared from religious still-birth.

Before considering Mary, and the very familiar, but calamitously-sentimentalised, story of her encounter with the angel Gabriel, a brief comparison with Saint Paul. When Paul's name is mentioned two common thoughts leap to mind. Many people think about his apparently woman-despising theology. Others make a great deal about his dramatic conversion. It is the conversion drama which I mention today.

There are two accounts of the conversion dramas of St Paul. Most of what is commonly known about St Paul comes from St Luke's 'gospel part B', the Acts of the Apostles. Luke's account of Paul's conversion is one of the great abused texts in Christianity. 'Abused' because it is illegitimately employed to promote a dangerously one-sided teaching about conversion and evangelism. By Luke's account Paul had an overwhelming religious experience which was visually depictable like a George Lucas film, and then within a matter of days set about telling all and sundry about it. However by Paul's own account, primarily in his letter to the church at Galatia, the experience itself is not to be told and no mortal is permitted to repeat,¹ and Paul himself immediately

¹

2 Corinthians 12:2-4

spends three years off the scene in Arabia and Damascus.² I assume Paul's own description of his experience to be the more reliable, or, to be more precise, the more pertinent in terms of a description of religious experience. (Luke had other purposes in mind.)

The point is this: religious experience is not religious commodity. Religious experience is much too profound to be packaged up in five minutes and touted to all and sundry without discrimination. Time, space and silence are required in order to come to an understanding about the meaning and purpose of the experience. That, in a nutshell, is what Advent's fourth Sunday reveals to us through the experience of Blessed Mary.

Like St Paul caught up into Paradise encountering Christ, Mary was caught up by the experience of the angel's visitation. In fact, we will never know for sure exactly what Mary saw and heard. It is important to remember that St Luke's memorable account is not news reportage but theological reflection. Like St Paul, something of immensity and incomprehensibility is revealed to Mary, by the power of God's overshadowing Spirit. Like St Paul, it is Mary's *response* to this overshadowing which matters to us who have caught a glimpse of the old order of things breaking down and something new coming to birth. Like St Paul, Mary's *consent* to the conception and the gestation is the point – 'Here I am... let it be with me according to your word.' And like St Paul, it is something which takes place only in silence, space and time.

Thus, quite the reverse of the loud and attention-seeking religious salesmanship with which the church is so enamoured, the true work of the disciple is the coming to an understanding of the enormity of the experience, silently pondering all these things in our hearts. There is a time to speak, of course. According to John, Mary spoke up at a wedding party in Cana, roughly 33 years after the experience of her encounter with Gabriel! The time to speak, like the words to speak, are given to us. Perhaps there is nothing more frustrating than remaining silent!

We have seen in Advent's Sundays the pattern of revelation – from the disturbing 'Wake up!' call which crashes through our denial, to the dissolution of all our clever strategies, to the terror of the loss of belief which is necessary to make way for the new birth. At last, having been thus attentive in our watching and waiting we experience something – an angelic visitation, the clarity of revelatory insight, the mystery of the numinous encounter – and so experiencing, our instinctive reaction is to want to immediately tell the whole world about it, like teenagers falling in love. But this last step is perhaps the most difficult of all.

At this time of the year the church is inclined to blab just as much, and just as inane and ignorantly, as the merchants who employ baby Jesus for a bit of marketing assistance. We don't even seem to be able to resist the temptation to introduce Christmas into Advent. Silence, space, and time, treasuring all these things in our heart,³ is the only way of gestation, the only way to prevent a still birth or a premature birth – and certainly the only way to prevent the religious hubris to which we are so prone. It will be revealed to us what we are to say, if we are to say anything at all, and when we are to say it, and to whom it will be creative and life-giving to say it.

Our task is the same as St Paul's and Blessed Mary's – to remain in silence, treasuring what we have experienced in our hearts, protected from the egoism of religious hubris, until such time as the new creation which God is birthing in us comes to full term. The reason we resist the temptation to light the Christ Candle until the Midnight Mass has nothing to do with legalism – but everything to do with a willing and silent consenting with Mary to wait until that which God is birthing in us comes safely to full term.

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

² Galatians 1:17ff

³ Luke 2:51