

God Earthed in Human Ground

a sermon preached at

Midnight Mass

25 December 2008

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lecture: Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Imagine that our minds are like a library. Row after row of shelves. Perhaps several floors. All manner of books, large and small, on every conceivable subject. Now the only problem is that there are so many wonderful books that you have to work out some system for sorting them into different categories so that you can find the one you want – history, literature, politics, economics, biology, mathematics, international relations, archaeology, philosophy, ethics, morality, education, nature studies, cooking, poetry, and so on.

Well tonight's feast poses this question: in which section would you put your books about the birth of Christ? My hunch is that for many the answer is the history section. Or perhaps the fantasy section! And the great tragedy is that lost in the history section of the library of our minds, the birth of 'little Lord Jesus no crying he makes' is profoundly disconnected from the rest of the mind's library. This perfect new-born whose amazing self-discipline ensures that his parents get an uninterrupted night's sleep, what has he to do with ethics and education, let alone with politics and economics?

On this holy and blessed night we take faltering steps, once more, to the Christmas Crib, peering into the darkness hoping to catch a glimpse of that which we cannot see in broad daylight. And once again we find ourselves struggling to make the connection between the dusty religious history section of our minds' libraries and the real & messy world which we inhabit day-to-day. My suggestion tonight is that we find assistance from an unexpected quarter – the paradoxical doctrine of the Trinity.

Trinity doctrine has stimulated a great many wonderful and challenging questions which I firmly intend to leave to one side tonight. Instead, there is just one question, which has only come into prominence in recent times, which seems particularly apposite at Christmas – what is the relation between God the Holy Trinity and you and me? Trinity doctrine is a daring and bold enterprise, an attempt to describe what God is doing when God is not doing anything at all, a symbol for what we moderns might call the inner relations within God, God's true self and inner life. It goes without saying that this is an attempt to describe the indescribable: "Its essence is relationship, endlessly circulating love, given out totally, taken in totally, given back again... circulating love so palpable, so tangible, that the love itself possesses its own shape and personhood. What goes on there is a constant giving, receiving, and giving back, all interdependent and all connected... We are invited into this tent, into this big house, into its circulating currents. It seeks to come into us, to take up residence in us."¹ Trinity is more like the internet than the library. Every single part is connected to every other. There is no compartmentalising. Everything is inter-connected and circulating. One big tent of circulating Divine love.

Well so far so good, if you can go along with that. But how does the Trinity take up residence in us, how do we enter into its big tent?

On the back cover of this year's Christmas newsletter there is a rather poor reproduction of a 15th century wooden statue known as La Vierge Ouvrante, 'the opening virgin'. She sits all calm and serene, even stony-faced, holding her Son as though posing for a photo. But on the front cover we see her opened, and she reveals

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Ulanov A B, *The Wisdom of the Psyche*, Cambridge: Cowley Publications, 1988, p91.

inside her the Father, holding the crucified Son, surrounded by the Spirit. What this very medieval image graphically reveals is the missing connection between the God we describe as Holy Trinity and Incarnation – the medievals were more advanced than we prefer to admit. Here, Mary is the feminine ground which is required for the Divine in-carnating, the good earth in whom God scatters the seed. Only by being planted in her is it possible for the circulating Divine love to be manifest, to be enfleshed, to touch earth. In fact, without that grounding, that earthing in the human vessel, the Divine remains literally dis-embodied, to be admired or feared or sought across an unbridgeably-vast chasm, dangerously idealised and one-sidedly rationalistic.

Now here's the punch line. The 'opening virgin' is not a relic in the medieval section of the library. The astonishing Christian good news is that the eternally-circulating Divine Love requires the human vessel, ordinary human ground, in order to be expressed at all. The Kingdom, as Jesus declared, is inside us! ²

It is immediately apparent from this that our Christmas story does not belong in the quaint history section, and certainly not the fantasy section. For here is the angelic invitation to humankind to accept its role in the Divine-human partnership, to give birth to the Divine in the ordinary and messy particularity of our lives - to receive the Divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity. This is about us. The birth of Jesus is about something in us coming to birth. God enters the world through the virginal flesh of all human persons. Every person is repeatedly called to receive the Divine overshadowing. Every person - in all our messiness, confusion, fleeting moments of clarity, accomplishments and failures - is the means by which the Holy Trinity is earthed.

On Monday in this church we will honour the life of, and give thanks, for the earthy grounding of the Eternal Lover in the life of Ngatai Mellory Manning, her life brutally extinguished somewhere near here. Like us, she also was created in the image and likeness of God, fleshy bearer of the Divine. There is no justification, no adequate explanation, no excuse for the rage-filled and appalling violence to her God-created body. Every person, regardless of superficial observations and judgments – and including her killer for whom we also pray – every person is the 'virgin who opens', the ground in which God the Trinity is earthed.

But how? What does it mean to be, like Mary, the virgin who opens, revealing within us the Father, the crucified Son, and the Holy Spirit?

God being born of woman without a human father accurately symbolises the way religious experience implants and gestates in us. The Divine enters us – females and males alike - through the feminine mode of our being: instinct, earth, ground, flesh, receptivity, generativity. The Divine enters through non-rational channels, unfathered by any conscious skill or reasoning, through the unconscious, neither created nor authorised. Overshadowing is indeed an accurate description of our experience of the Divine. We all know this experience of being overshadowed, when least expected, when our guard is down, when we are busy making our own ego-centric plans, or when, on those few occasions, we managed to be attentive. We all know the experience of being overwhelmed by what seems impossible or scandalous or too heavy a burden. We are all virginal ground in which the Divine desires and requires to be grounded, earthed, made flesh, incarnate.

Mary, as first of all disciples, is pioneer, guide and mentor for us, pointing the way to Jesus, just as he points beyond himself to the Father. ³ Furthermore, "Mary symbolises the appropriate attitude to such momentous happenings: She hears. She sees. She feels the impact, the mark. She feels unworthy and without understanding." ⁴ Yet she takes what is offered and receives into her being the circulating and inter-connected Divine Love.

That is the Christmas invitation, once again, for it takes a lifetime – to wake up from distraction with historical and sentimental curiosities, to accept the Divine invitation to our calling as the virgin who opens, to be the ground within which the Holy and Blessed Trinity is earthed and thus completed, to receive the Divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity, to become indeed children of God, ⁵ Word become flesh.

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david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

² Luke 17:21

³ John 8:28

⁴ Ulanov A B, p99.

⁵ John 1:12

⁶ John 1:14