

A Profound Disturbance

a sermon preached on

Advent Sunday

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lecton: Jeremiah 33:14-16, 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13, Luke 21:25-36

Advent, once again, invites us to meditate upon the greatest mystery of all – Incarnation, the inter-mingling of the Divine and the human. But we are so accustomed to singing the sentimentalised songs and setting out the nostalgic decorations, that I wonder whether we can really hear and see. At precisely the time of the year when most of the influences around us, and sometimes even the Church itself, promote a facile and superficial Christmastime tranquillity, the Advent gospels plunge us into the very opposite. We latter-day disciples of Christ have drifted far from the religious intuition of the earliest Christians, who were in no doubt whatsoever that the Incarnation announced the end of an old religious dispensation and the birth of something shockingly new. So much so that it is now almost impossible for us to really attend to the Incarnation at the time of the year the consumer culture calls 'Christmas'. If we are courageous enough to scrutinise ourselves, it will be possible to observe a myriad of ways in which our attitudes and behaviours at this time of the year actually work to thwart the Incarnation gospel. Now, as at Jesus' birth, powerful forces, conscious and unconscious, line up against Incarnation.

For I suspect that while we might be quite enamoured with the *idea* of being God's chosen, it would seem that we are not at all keen on bearing the burden of the responsibility required of Incarnation. Nevertheless, in spite of this great resistance within us – and, considering our creaturely frailty, perhaps resistance within God too – Incarnation, according to the Christian evangel, strips humankind of its old infantile dependence on the externalised deity. Incarnation requires of humankind responsibility with God for the ongoing work of creation. Because of our fierce resistance to taking responsibility, and because of the apparent comforts of the old dispensation Incarnation is bound to begin with profound disturbance.

Profound disturbance takes many forms. In the apocalyptic mind of first century Ancient Near East it naturally took expression in wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes, insurrections, famines, plagues, portents and great signs from heaven, persecutions and betrayal, signs in the sun and moon and the stars, roaring of the sea and waves, people fainting from fear and foreboding, the 'Son of Humanity' coming on a cloud.¹ Certainly the persecutions and wars were realised in their life time. But then, human history is so littered with persecutions and wars they are hardly convincing signs on their own. In our own time it's impossible to ignore profound disturbances manifest as Holocaust, 'world war', ethnic cleansing, terrorism, financial pillage and greed, global poverty, ecological catastrophe, to name only the most obvious. And yet, just it was for the earliest followers of Jesus, these phenomena, for all their lurid sensationalism, are not where the action really lies. Rather, they are the near-constant, mass-media-massaged backdrop which disguises the real thing. The most profound disturbance turns out to be something out of sight, something humble and seemingly-powerless, occurring not where the powerful play their perennial games – in a backwater town, in a poor peasant woman, out the back of a public house, in an animal feeding trough.

This most profound disturbance of all signals, of course, the utterly impossible – the previously-separated domains of the Divine and the human have been united. This admixture, not surprisingly, is tremendously explosive, full of risk, to both the human and the Divine. We will indeed see the Human One coming!² It is a matter of such enormity – and such ambivalence possibly on both sides of the equation – that its genesis must surely precipitate a profound disturbance in the cosmos.

¹ Luke 21:9,10-11,16,25-27

² Luke 21:27

Modern physicists have created an entirely new sub-branch of their discipline which they call ‘chaos theory’. One probably needs a PhD to grasp it, but any ordinary person can at least recognise this much – a previously-stable state, somewhat mysteriously, slides into a chaotic state in which nothing is stable at all; then, just as mysteriously, suddenly a surprising order and often exquisitely-beautiful structure emerges out of the chaos. The state of a teenager’s bedroom might be an analogy on homely scale.

The announcement on Advent’s first Sunday declares that chaos is imminent. Of course, we prefer our settled state, even if we are painfully aware of its manifest limitations. But this settled state will be disrupted, by a profound disturbance. It is *necessary*. Considering the enormity of Incarnation, we are not likely ever to voluntarily choose the full implications of being co-creators with the Divine. On the whole, we prefer the slumber of childish dependence on an externalised deity, who, we hope and pray, will pull the levers and press the buttons that will deliver to us what we want. Thus the profound disturbance is necessary to wake us up – a great Advent theme! ³

But how? How does this happen, in practice? It is possible to be woken from slumber by the many profound disturbances in the world outside us. And there have always been a few especially large personalities who have been woken up by some grave injustice in their day, and consequently initiated the greatest social movements in history. But most of us simply feel overwhelmed by their enormity and seeming-insolubility. The first Christmas testifies to the fact that waking up begins with a single, humble point, with a disturbance experienced individually, personally, invisibly. The Christian proclamation is that our experience is the experience of Jesus – the necessity of a profound disturbance experienced personally, individually. Something overthrows our previously-settled state. The disturbance may occur in our own bodies, in a myriad of guises. Or it may take the form of a shocking outer event. In either case we experience chaos disrupting our lives, which appears to us to be a disturbance caused by a force outside ourselves, a malevolent person, or germ, or gene. So our initial reaction is a desire for the clock to be turned back - just like the children of Israel in the Sinai wilderness hankering after the fleshpots of Egypt.

This profound disturbance, of course, is not the end in itself, but only the means – hence the symbol of Advent’s four Sundays of preparation for the Feast of Incarnation. The good news symbolised by Advent’s first Sunday is that the profound disturbance each of experiences is necessary – the means by which we wake up to the reality of the eternally-unfolding Incarnation.

If we can “be on our guard and alert” we might be able to see that in the midst of the shocking or frightening chaos, the Human One is coming - in us! Perhaps the difficult discipline of Advent is resisting the many temptations to obscure or solve or bury or otherwise deny the profound disturbance which visits each of personally, uniquely – and to trust that “when these things begin to take place, [we should] stand up and raise [our] heads, because [our] redemption is near.” ⁴

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

³ Luke 21:34-36

⁴ Luke 21:28