

A Voice Crying in the Wilderness

a sermon preached on the

2nd Sunday of Advent

Sunday 6 December 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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Lecture: Baruch 5:1-9, Philippians 1:3-11, Luke 3:1-6

There is no doubting the certainty of the chaotic circumstances of the world around us. None of us needs to be convinced about these 'signs of the times', since the many news services keep us informed up-to-the-minute with all the latest calamities at home and abroad. Equally, we are faced with the certainty of the chaotic circumstances of our inner world, that terrain which Jesus called the soul, *ψυχη psyche*. But we seem to find it very difficult to accept these inner 'signs of the times'.

It is not surprising that our culture cannot accept the reality of the soul, since it has become firmly addicted to only that which can be 'scientifically verified' and which can be bought and sold. Yet, paradoxically, even Christians, even religious leaders, may deny the priority of this inner reality which was so foundational to Jesus himself, and to the Scriptures in general. This state of affairs, incomprehensible to our early church forebears, is partly because we are the inheritors of several centuries of materialist-rationalist reduction of human life, indeed all life. Even in the church we are inclined to measure everything externally and superficially, behaving as though faith consisted in a series of tasks, enterprises, strategies, and institutional structures. And perhaps, above all, because the soul, that fundamental meeting place of the human and the Divine, still frightens us by its autonomy, refusing to bow to the ego's demands, asking us to pay a price we would rather not.

Whatever the reason, our widespread refusal to attend to the reality of what is happening in the inner landscape inevitably imprisons us in a restless and futile search for the root of all our problems in the other person, the other nation. We still cannot take seriously Jesus' teaching about the insignificance of the speck in our sister-brother's eye in comparison with the log in our own. ¹ Speaking personally, I spent most of the period from the end of my teens until only recent times on this restless and futile search for the root of all problems in the collective. Because of my particular makeup, this took the form of what may be best described as serial crusading – against ecological & economic imperialism, against patriarchy, against racism, against xenophobia, and lastly, against the church's homophobia and its pernicious, evil consequences. There's nothing wrong with these causes in themselves, but a cause fought out of the wrong motive, fought unconsciously, damages both the crusader and those against whom all the wrongs of the world have been directed.

My experience is that, sooner or later, the reality of the chaos in the inner landscape makes its presence so powerfully felt that we have no alternative but to take it seriously. Something stops our futile externalising in its tracks. This takes many forms, according to the uniqueness of our personal stories. Finally, all the evil and wrong I had projected onto other persons and institutions had to be encountered within. When we do finally wake up, now we are in no doubt whatsoever that the distress, the calamity, the chaos, the profound disturbance is *actually within us*. When this moment dawns, perhaps after much suffering, at last we have begun to see the Son of Humanity coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ² The new work of creation which the Spirit of God is accomplishing is imminent, miraculously, in each of us. It should be perfectly

¹ Matthew 7:1-5

² Luke 21:27

obvious, especially to people of faith, that when the priority of the soul is denied, the new work of creation is impossible!

But, as Jesus teaches, it is a state of affairs that is both disorienting and terrifying. No one in their right mind goes out of their way looking for this! Yet into this state of seeming chaos, which may even feel to us like the end of everything familiar and reliable, something extraordinary and unexpected happens. Suddenly, as though out of nowhere, there is a voice: “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness.”³ The Scriptures testify to this very important fact about the voice – the voice cries out in wilderness, **ερημος** *erēmos*. That is to say, the voice is spoken into the state of affairs which is symbolised as profound disturbance, chaos, is a state of emptiness, silence, hostility, the collapse of all old certainties – possibly even collapse of the very faith which has sustained us until now. It is this state of affairs, John the Baptist tells us, that is precisely the condition which gives rise to the voice. That is presumably why Jesus could say to his frightened and bewildered disciples, describing the apocalyptic signs of the end times, that when all these things begin to happen the disciple can stand up with raised heads, because redemption is near.⁴ This voice, the voice of the Divine, speaks directly into our very real inner experience of wilderness.

And what does the voice say to our inner turmoil and bewilderment and fear? “Prepare the way of the Lord, make the Lord’s paths straight.”⁵ God is coming to every human heart, uniquely, and precisely according to the uniqueness of every person. God is becoming human, in you and me – that’s the point of the Christmas celebration for which we prepare. “All flesh shall see the salvation of God.”⁶ God is assuming human flesh! All persons are being prepared to put on forever the beauty of the glory of God.⁷ Who can accept this incomprehensible state of affairs? And how can it be, given the barrenness, the silence, the disorientation that we feel?

Our task is to attend, to listen, to watch, to wait, and to cooperate, to recognise the voice in the midst of the chaos inside us. We must listen! Whereas we had felt nothing other than uniform confusion, calamity, chaos, disorientation, fear and trembling, now the voice divides the bleak and despairing uniformity of our despairing state: “Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be laid low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth.”⁸ What we had perceived as undivided chaos, like the nothingness, the void, which was the *prima materia* of the creation in Genesis,⁹ suddenly is divided - just as light was divided from darkness, day from night, heaven from earth.¹⁰ That is the second movement of the soul which is symbolised by Advent’s second Sunday. Division of the chaos within us is the necessary step for the sake of the coming birth of God in the human soul.

What can we do? Our task is to listen, to wait, to wake up, to be silent enough in order to hear the voice who cries in the wilderness. As John the Baptist has declared, the voice will speak – in surprisingly varied ways according to the uniqueness of our individuality. Perhaps the difficult Advent Two discipline is to resist the temptation to run away from the wilderness, to fill the void with TV and Facebook and consumerism, with mind-numbing trivia of every kind, with relentless busyness and distraction - a particularly real and lethal temptation for us all during December! Only by giving priority to the soul, by attending to the silence in the inner wilderness will it be possible to hear the voice who is proclaiming incarnation - imminent birth of the Divine in the humble vessel of the ordinary soul.

If we can manage this much, each of us to the degree that we are able, we will less likely to be enslaved to the external spectacles which so hold us in their thrall – and the good work which God has begun in us will be completed on the day of Christ.¹¹ In this way the Eucharistic symbol is becoming enfleshed in each of us.

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³ Luke 3:4b, quoting Isaiah 40:3

⁴ Luke 21:28

⁵ Luke 3:4c

⁶ Luke 3:6

⁷ Baruch 5:1b

⁸ Luke 3:5

⁹ Genesis 1:2

¹⁰ Genesis 1:3-8

¹¹ Philippians 1:6

