

Incarnation: Evolutionary Leap

a sermon preached at

Midnight Mass

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at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

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

As we know, evolution is organic. By which I mean that the processes of evolution are processes of natural development, each new stage of life arising out of that which preceded it. Even when there is a great leap forward – such as when fishes first crawled out of the seas, ushering in the era of the amphibians – the new form remains organically related to its predecessors.

So too religion. The processes of religion, or faith if you like, are organic. If religion does not evolve, organically, it is at risk of extinction. Little wonder that so many people, clinging on to a child's stage of religious development, do not experience a living religion. Little wonder the church-as-institution is so fearful, anxious, reactionary, and at times so violent and oppressive.

Tonight's feast embodies precisely the evolutionary development of religion. Reading the texts set each day through Advent's four weeks, one cannot fail to be struck by the recurring insistence that Jesus is *not* a 'cuckoo in the nest' - the Jesus whose birth is recorded by Luke and Matthew does not appear as out of nowhere. Over and over again the Scriptures testify to a developmental process in the religion of Israel, which, ultimately, Christians came to regard as the precursors of the Messianic fulfilment they saw accomplished in Jesus. On this night we hear but one fragment of that religious intuition, from the mouth of the 6th century prophet Isaiah. But his is just one of a great many voices, over a period of about a millennia. Thus Luke the evangelist opens his gospel with these words: "Since many have undertaken to compile a narrative about the events *which have been fulfilled* among us..."¹

'Fulfilled!' What Luke endeavours to describe is the *fulfilment of all that has gone before*. The gospels repeatedly claim to express this sense of Jesus as the fulfilment of what has gone before him. In the well-known account of the journey to Emmaus, at the gospel's end, the resurrected Jesus appears unrecognised to two dispirited disciples, explaining that the same events which have so shattered them are actually the fulfilment of the religious developments preceding them.² So Incarnation is not an aberration, a 'UFO', but an organic step in the religious development of humans.

But precisely because of this fact, Incarnation is not a static state, a historical concept, a once-off event 2000 years ago, a mere set of facts or propositions to 'believe in'. And it has to be admitted that this is the perilous reef on which the anxious ship of Christianity so easily becomes grounded. Jesus is indeed 'Son of God', but Jesus is not the *only* Son of God. You and I are Sons and Daughters of God³ – that is the consequence of the evolutionary development which the revelation in Jesus Christ sets in motion. According to John, Jesus himself expected that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, his followers would complete what he himself had not accomplished, and would even do greater works than his own.⁴ Perhaps we have never been able to take those Biblical teachings seriously? Whatever the reasons, it is at precisely this point that the edifice Christian institutions recoils and founders. The inevitable consequence is an evolutionary dead end, the termination of a non-fruitful religious development – in the same way that countless species have become extinct. It is

¹ Luke 1:1

² Luke 24:13-32

³ John 10:34

⁴ John 14:12, 16:12-13

hardly surprising that religious development suited to the first century Ancient Near East, or to the 16th century, is simply a dead end for many people now!

This feast, this night in which the Divine is to be found in the squalor and the despised, is both the celebration of the fact of evolutionary religious development, as well as the charge to you and I to willingly cooperate with the processes of Incarnation. For the insistence that Jesus is the only Son of God inevitably leads to an infantile psychological state in which Jesus does all that is necessary. Jesus does it all for me, thus absolving me from my responsibility to evolve, to suffer the consequences of becoming fully human. But the One whose coming we celebrate is the One who commissions each of us to embody the greatness and the majesty of the Divine in the squalor and the despised of our lives. That is the surprising evolutionary religious development embodied in Jesus, and which he commissions all humans to embody, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Needless to say, I find this a somewhat alarming prospect. It does seem safer, easier, to let Jesus do it all for me. Moreover, it does offend me that the greatness of the Divine should be embodied in the squalor and despised. I like the idea of the greatness, the triumph, the success, the majesty, the power, the wealth, the certainty, the celebrity, the omnipotence. To be frank, however, I am utterly disinterested in Mary's lowliness, Joseph's humility, Jesus' frailty, and the adoring company of that society's shepherd outcasts. I find it offensive not only because of the outer company I would rather keep, but more painfully so because of the 'inner company' I would prefer to banish.

For the inescapable fact is that Incarnation, whilst undoubtedly an organic religious development in history, nevertheless ushers in an excruciating stage in human consciousness – the shock of which still shakes the foundations of the world. Namely, the collision of opposites, of Divinity and humanity, of Spirit and flesh, of Heaven and earth. In Christian symbolism that collision of opposites is most succinctly, and shockingly, represented by the means of the death of this 'holy infant so tender and mild'.

Perhaps, at the end of all our protests, this is in truth the real reason for the infantilism so widespread in Christianity in our time – we are simply unwilling to suffer the same consequences, what our tradition calls the *via crucis*, the way of the Cross, which the birth of the infant Lord signals as the necessary evolution in human consciousness. I, for one, tremble at the prospect. There are many days when evolution is a most unattractive prospect.

What makes this night a celebration and source of true joy, however, is this: the power of the same Spirit who breathed Isaiah's prophetic vision and Mary's virginal conception, is the desire of the Divine to be embodied in you and me. This is the leading edge of an unstoppable evolutionary development. By the twinkling light of tonight's feast, and in the sacramental grace of Christ's Body and Blood offered to all, we both celebrate and hope that we may also be bearers of the eternal Word – Sons and Daughters of God, embodying the dawning evolution in human consciousness first revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God!

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