

We are not our own

a sermon preached on the

1st Sunday after Christmas

Sunday 27 December 2009

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

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Lecture: 1 Samuel 2:18-20,26, Colossians 3:12-17, Luke 2:41-52

Christian faith having been so reduced to moral system has without doubt accomplished a great many benefits and advances in human civilisation. Without this morality the world would undoubtedly be a meaner, greedier, more violent and less loving place. Generations of young people have, at the hands of this monolithic church teaching in morality and communal responsibility, been formed as decent citizens with a foundational set of ethics needed to make a civilised society. This is one of Christianity's great accomplishments, which we can only hope will endure in spite of the worst of Christianity's excesses and failures.

But are not other religious and philosophical systems also capable of engendering such ethics? And is this the essence, the heart, of Christian faith? It does not seem so to me, as I read the Scriptures and the tradition. It certainly does not seem so according to my reading of the life of the One whose birth we celebrate and who we are called to follow.

The lections for this first Sunday after Christmas propel us, suddenly and without warning, from the moment of Jesus' humble birth in an obscure backwater to a moment when he is, according to Luke, 12 years old, and to the very centre of Israel – the Temple in Jerusalem. And to help us hear this story, the lectionary also gives us the curious little story about the boy Samuel – girded with a linen ephod, serving in the synagogue under the guidance of the priest Eli, visited by his mother Hannah who, apparently, gave him up to Eli for adoption when he was just an infant.¹

The common motif in these texts on this first Sunday after Christmas, when we might still be feeling sentimental or nostalgic, is as arresting as it is abrupt – neither Samuel nor Jesus are the masters of their fates. Jesus' insolent-sounding response to his understandably-anxious parents could not make the point more explicitly: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"² The precursor motif in the Samuel story is equally confronting – prefiguring Gabriel's greeting to Mary, Eli blesses Hannah because she has willingly consented that her first-born son is not her own.³ So just when we might have been tempted by Christmastime's nostalgia, sentimentality, over-consumption, or ubiquitous family-religion, the first Sunday after Christmas sets before us a critically-important truth about the Incarnation – we are not our own, we belong to Another.

This is obviously an unpalatable concept, certainly in our time and culture. For us it is an article of religion that we construct our own realities. We are the masters of our destiny. We can make anything we want happen, with the right attitude and with hard work. By the 'power of positive thinking', or by 'winning friends and influencing people', or by the right qualifications, or by the right share portfolio, or with the right strategic plan and mission statement, we can construct the futures we decide we want. These have truly become articles of religion in our culture - our entire Western culture is religiously committed to this ideology. And the uncomfortable truth is that I am committed to this article of religion – it has been the air I have breathed and the water I have been drinking since infancy. Paradoxically, it is even possible to be a 'christian' and be as addicted to this kind of religion – only that we pray to the deity who we believe can

¹ 1 Samuel 1, 2

² Luke 2:49

³ 1 Samuel 1:22

manipulate the laws of biology and physics in order to deliver our needs and wants.

However, the consequence of Incarnation is that we are not masters of our own destiny, we are not our own. Like Jesus, and like Samuel, we belong to Another. As Sons and Daughters of God there is Another with whom we are to be co-creators in the eternal processes of cosmic evolution. Co-creating with this Other requires relinquishment of our own self-constructed ideals, no matter how laudable or worthy they might be – no matter how much we have depended upon them thus far! Jesus ‘in his Father’s house’ is not an image of either super-morality or triumphal-communality, but an eternal symbol of relinquishment of all these for the sake of the cooperation with something, a Someone, greater than himself. Of course, to anyone who has read the whole of the gospel this should come as no surprise.

But to be honest, I do not find this aspect of Incarnation particularly palatable. ‘Little lord Jesus no crying he makes’ is easier to swallow, rather less demanding! I would rather pursue the goals and accomplishments which I have constructed myself – those measures by which I have defined who I am and what I can do. It feels like death relinquishing those ways in which I have constructed my life and defined myself.

Furthermore, and more confrontingly, it is painful to realise that it is perfectly possible to subscribe to the *idea* of Incarnation, yet continue to live, to behave, otherwise. I said ‘yes’ to the idea of baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection and its consequences some years ago, but continue to struggle with undergoing it, embodying, enfleshing, doing it. ‘Believing in’ a religious idea does not necessarily guarantee that one *does* it, embodies it. Perhaps we catch a glimpse of this in Mary’s response to Jesus – though she knew, intellectually, because of the angel Gabriel’s annunciation to her that this first-born Son of hers would not belong to her, when confronted with the doing of it, the embodiment, according to Luke: [she] did not understand what [Jesus] said to them.”⁴ Nor would this be the last time Mary would struggle – Jesus’ shocking rebuff to her outside the house where he is healing and teaching springs to mind,⁵ not to mention her living hell witnessing Jesus’ last days in Jerusalem! We are in good company if even the Blessed Mary, first of all disciples, struggled with the consequences of Incarnation!

Incarnation is the assurance that, with Mary and her Son, we are more than the sum of our ego-consciousness. Incarnation is the celebration and the promise that by our willing cooperation with that which is greater than ourselves we are co-creators with the Divine, Sons and Daughters of God. “No longer I who live,” as St Paul intuited, “but Christ who lives in me.”⁶ By our willing, conscious participation in the Sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood – foreshadowed in the communal liturgical action, and enfleshed in the decisions and attitudes of our daily lives - we are becoming what we consume.

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⁴ Luke 2:50

⁵ Luke 8:19-21

⁶ Galatians 2:20