

Sunday 5th December 2021
Advent 2 Evensong (C)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Isaiah 40.1-11
NT: Luke 1.1-25

One of the challenges of communicating the Christmas story is relating the particular to the universal. The traditional Christmas story is actually very 'local' and small: across the world crib figures are quite literally taken out of very small spaces at this time of year and put up for all to see in another limited place. Our own crib in the Narthex is an excellent example: the entire Christmas story is told in a space about 5' x 3'. Compare this with what we are actually trying to say, which is that something of universal magnitude happened in history, that God was born amongst us. I'm not sure that we can really capture that in a 5' x 3' space.

Language is key to our proclamation of the birth. This does not mean that we have to deconstruct the traditional story, but we can look at the way expansive language captures something broader. There are some key images which are traditionally used to convey a world beyond what we can capture in the specific. Shelley – hardly the most religious poet – contrasts the expanse of universe where everything is brought into union with something else with the locality of a man loving a woman. He says: “See the mountains kiss high heaven / And the waves clasp one another.”

Or the librettist for the *Marriage of Figaro* send Cherubino off to war “Per montagne, per valloni,” creating distance and expanse from the domestic setting of the opera. And then here we are reading in the prophecy of Isaiah “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low.”

Mountains are the trope for something beyond the local and domestic in all of these examples. This is not unusual and you will find that they feature in literature in all sorts of ways, from the Lord of the Rings through to Dracula. They are distant and often menacing.

The writers of the Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke – shrank the story on purpose. The majesty of Isaiah’s prophecy about the forerunner, which we heard today, is brought down to a domestic tale in our second reading from Luke: “There was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.” Try and ignore the blatantly misogynistic woman-blaming in the last sentence there, and instead see what the writer has done, which is firstly to make it relatable, and secondly to make it human.

The domestication of the Christmas story is itself an image of incarnation because it makes the story real. For all those who question elements of the Christmas story as depicted in our crib in the Narthex, they are forgetting that it is speaking to the limits of the human mind. If we cannot say something specific then it is not real. A theory needs illustration before we can accept it. And of course Jesus knew this all too well: he didn’t just say ‘love your neighbour’ (which is a nice, but rather general idea), he said, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers...” and he went on to tell the story of the Good Samaritan, which I suspect is the best known of all of Jesus’ teaching stories.

Understanding the connection between the universal and domestic means that we devalue neither. My own engagement with the Christmas story owes much to my own academic background, and I am interested in how we express theistic belief in philosophical terms. But you do not win many followers for Jesus by discussing rationalist and post-rationalist belief. It is more effective to talk about a baby born in a stable. Having said that, if we leave our proclamation of the incarnation at the level of a Christmas carol, then we are not helping people to understand what the incarnation is all about. Terms such as “Son of God” are distinctly unhelpful at capturing the credal statements of “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.” What we actually need to do is to use grown up language to describe the incarnation whilst, at the same time, making incarnation a real event for people and not a paper-based exercise.

And so we come to John the Baptist, who is the subject of our readings today. The prophecy of the forerunner and the actualité of John the Baptist fuse the greater narrative of expectation versus reality. The Gospel accounts of him do not allow him to articulate his own fulfilment of the prophecy, but they do make real his role. Using the motif of annunciation by Gabriel – also, of course, utilized for Jesus – we understand John the Baptist as both a divine messenger and also a real person. These parallel appearances are not like Jesus, both human and divine, but a moment where we can see the announcement of God’s word: the finger pointed in prophecy becomes the finger pointed in reality.

Ideas and theories are great, but we need reality to create transformation. The incarnation transformed the relationship between God and his creation, and this is the story we are telling at Christmas. This is not a theoretical stance, but one which actually changes our lives. The narrative in our crib over there is not the reality in itself, but maybe it is our

route to it. So when we tell the Christmas story, we need to make it real for those who hear it, and we may even need to take them on a journey to Bethlehem.

Fr Crispin Pailing