

Sermon

Sunday 20th December, 2009

Lessons Micah 5: 2 – 5a

St Luke 1: 39 – 56

Prayer of Illumination

Let us pray.

O Holy Wisdom, the Word that proceeds from the Most High, reaching from the beginning to the end, and graciously ordering all things; come, and teach us the way of understanding; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Mary sang, ‘Holy is His name....His mercy is on those who fear Him
from generation to generation.’**

St Luke 1: 49 – 50

Did you know that Joseph was killed not long after Jesus was born? At the very least, that is the view of the Jesus Scholar, Marcus Borg. Let’s think about this for a moment. Jesus was born just before the death of Herod the Great in 4BC. Herod was a Jew, a convert to Judaism, who ruled the Jewish homeland on behalf of the Romans. Herod’s death was the catalyst for unrest with many Jews believing that this was the moment for the Jewish people to break free from Rome’s oppressive rule and for the Jews to have their own ruler, this time their own God-appointed ruler. There was unrest and violence. Varus, the governor of Syria, sent three legions of troops, cavalry and additional infantry to Israel and to Galilee; in all, over twenty thousand men were sent into the area. About an hour’s walk from Nazareth was the town of Sepphoris. Sepphoris was the capital; it was the largest market town for many miles, it was the place where many men went in search of work and it was a town which was

expanding with new buildings and commerce. Jesus grew up in Nazareth after the events of 4BC. The scholar, Marcus Borg, argues that the major event in the village's life was 'the day the Romans came.' The Romans were not some distant mythological beings but soldiers who devastated Sepphoris and its surrounding villages. At Jesus' coming-of-age, Borg imagines this story:

One day, when he was old enough, Mary took Jesus up to the top of the Nazareth ridge. It was springtime, the breeze had cleared the air, and the wildflowers were already everywhere. Across the valley, Sepphoris gleamed white on its green hill. 'We knew they were coming,' Mary said, 'but your father had not come home. So we waited after the others were gone. Then we heard the noise, and the earth trembled a little. We did too, but your father had still not come home. Finally, we saw the dust and we had to flee, but your father never came home. I brought you up here today so you will always remember that day we lost him and what little else we had. We lived, yes, but with these questions. Why did God not defend those who defended God? Where was God that day the Romans came?'

You will remember the story later in Luke's Gospel when, at the age of twelve, Jesus is taken to the temple by his *parents*. He is taken there for much the same reason that parents today bring their children to church: to assist him on his journey of faith and to help deepen His insight into the Mystery of God. Jesus is taken to the temple at the age of twelve by His parents. In Greek, the Gospel states, 'His parents,' not Mary and Joseph. It is likely that if Joseph had been killed when Borg suggests then the young Mary would have married again. Joseph's early death in the life of Jesus is an explanation for the fact he is never mentioned again. But even beyond that, the story of the boy Jesus in

the temple is an echo or parallel story with that of the boy Samuel hearing the call of God. In other words, it is theology, not history.

Last year, you may recall, I spoke about the characters of Mary and Joseph as being literary constructs knit together by the early Christian community. In Joseph's case, the name 'Joseph' is suggestive of Joseph in the Old Testament, one of the twelve sons of Jacob, the one who rescues his family, his people, from certain death by taking them to Egypt. And, Joseph of old is the man of dreams. In the New Testament, Mary's husband is the one who saves the baby Jesus from slaughter by taking his family to Egypt and it is through dreams that Joseph learns of God's will for him, Mary and the baby Jesus. In similar fashion, the name 'Mary' is the Greek version of the Hebrew name 'Miriam.' Miriam is the older sister to Moses. It is Miriam who saves the life of the baby Moses: in other words, it is Miriam who gives life to the one who will liberate the Hebrews. There is a little more to it than that, but so the theory goes: Mary and Joseph are literary constructs designed to place Jesus in the role of liberator and to tie in His personal story with that of the Jewish nation.

The birth narratives are immensely rich. Besides the possible death of Joseph at the hands of the Romans and the possibility that, in fact, both Mary and Joseph are literary constructs, there is the story of Jesus' twin brother. Did you know that Jesus had a twin? It is bad news for every nativity scene in the world

but in the Nag Hammadi library, in the Gnostic Gospels, in the *Book of Thomas the Contender*, Jesus refers to Thomas as His twin. There is an issue about the name 'Thomas' because the name means no more than 'twin.' The disciple may have been called Jude or Judas but either way he is referred to as the twin of Jesus. The canonical Gospels do name Thomas as the twin, but they never name Thomas' twin brother. Is that because everybody knew it was Jesus?

I want to stop this line of reflection. One could go on almost indefinitely. There is much to be gained from reading and studying the best scholarship. There may yet be manuscripts uncovered in years to come which will through new light on the historicity of Jesus' birth and life. But, from my point of view, the Bible, the canonical texts, was written for meditation, intended as a window into the Mystery which we call God. These texts are theology, liturgy and history all mingled together and through the distillation of prayer are offered as the Word of God, a medium through which we can hear God speak, speak to us, if we listen with the heart. The traditional Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent, when celebrated as Bible Sunday, reads:

Blessed Lord, who has caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, that by patience and comfort of Your Holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which You have given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.

I have little doubt that the birth narratives including the concept of Virgin Birth are among the means by which the ancients asserted the transcendental character, the visible holiness, the Divine-like humanity, of individuals. The marriage of a god as father with a human mother is well-documented throughout the ancient world and common in mythology. But, listening with the heart, where do the texts take us? Jesus said, ‘Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God.’ Listening with the heart, where do the birth narratives take us? Thomas Dubay says of the Eternal Mind:

God, being most respectful of the freedom He has given to us, speaks to our hearts when it is uncluttered and silent. He does not interrupt worldly conversations and pursuits. We hear Him, therefore, only to the extent that we are disposed by inner stillness and undistracted by selfish desires.

And, St John of the Cross wrote:

The more a person rejoices over something outside God the less intense will be his joy in God....

Listening with the heart, where do the birth narratives take us?

This morning we listened to the Magnificat, the Song of Mary. In the birth narrative, once Mary is told by the angel that she will bear a Son, she says, ‘Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.’

Calvin wrote:

She offers and dedicates herself wholly to God, for Him to use her freely at His choosing. [She said] *Be it unto me*. This phrase can be

expounded in two ways, either that the holy virgin immediately turns herself to devotion and prayers, or that in one complete action she proceeds to yield and give herself over to God. My simple interpretation is that her assurance of God's power and free acceptance of His call lead her straight from receiving the promise to – not simply awaiting the outcome, but – earnestly desiring it.

Mary is the first of all saints. The birth narratives indicate to us not only that the early Church believed that Jesus of Nazareth was a man of transcendental depth, a man in whom they believed that they could hear the still small voice or whisper of Yahweh but also that those who placed their faith in Him were blessed. Mary's devotion, 'Let it be to me according to your word,' is the archetypal or definitive model of what it means to be a saint. If we our hearts can become uncluttered, uninterrupted by conversation and pursuits, if we can in our lives find pockets of stillness and there, in those moments, in the darkness of prayer, if there we could with sincerity utter the words of Mary, then we, like her, will be blessed.

Mary describes herself as the maidservant or servant of the Lord. The term is not demeaning. On the contrary, it is an honorific title which places Mary in the company of special servants of God, the great leaders of God's people, active agents of His salvific acts. The psalmist wrote, 'For He remembered His holy promise, And Abraham His servant.' In Nehemiah, the prophet wrote, 'You made known to them Your holy Sabbath, And commanded them precepts, statutes and laws, By the hand of Moses Your servant.' At the end of the Book

of Joshua, we read, ‘Now it came to pass after these things that Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died, being one hundred and ten years old.’

And so the list goes on to include David and Daniel. The seventeenth century Puritan, Richard Alliene, said:

This taste and relish of religion is not to be gotten but by our inward and experimental acquaintance with it; whilst it dwells but in the head and upon the tongue, it will be but a dry and insipid thing to you; whilst you dwell upon the surface, and outside, and are but triflers in religion, you may say of all your religion, as it was said of Samaria’s idolatry, ‘It hath no stalk, the bud yields no meal.’

Friends, you must go deeper in religion if ever you will taste the sweetness of it. Get your hearts to be so leavened and seasoned with it, get religion to be so naturalised to you, drink in the spirit of religion into you, that you may be metamorphosed and changed into its own image and nature, and then you will find how pleasant it will be to you.

Mary is the first of all saints because her words, ‘Let it be unto me according to your word,’ reveal the most profound spirituality. I firmly believe that the more God-conscious we can become the deeper the peace we will experience in our own lives and the greater will be our potential to respond to the demands of everyday life with grace and charity and compassion. The more aware we are of God’s immediate and loving Presence with us the less likely we are to deny others understanding, respect and love. Of course we fail at times, as individuals and as a community, but the more we crave and delve into the darkness and stillness of God, the more we will be changed. ‘Drink in the spirit of religion.’ ‘Let it be done unto me according to your word.’ That is what

the penitential season of Advent means. That is what the Church means when it calls us to prepare for the birth of Christ.

Amen.