

Christmas 1A 2007
St Peter's Box Hill

THE BRUTALITY OF CHRISTMAS.

It is possible that Christmas tableaux and nativity scenes can sensitise us to the grim reality and brutality of the gospel that has just been read to us.

In one sense it goes to the heart of the problem that keep some people from faith and make faith difficult for many others.

Perhaps it can be framed in the question of one person who said;" What kind of God would send an angel to warn one family of impending disaster and neglect the rest of the community so that their children were killed." Let me just recap the details.

The gospel for Holy Innocents continues after the Wise Men had visited the Holy family. After they left, God sent an angel in a dream to Joseph warning him that Herod the King would seek to destroy the baby Jesus. As a consequence they fled to Egypt and safety. The gospel continues with Herod's soldiers coming to Bethlehem and destroying all baby boys two years and under.

How could a good God not warn all the other families?

.I would like to share a story from a recent commentary on this gospel which highlights this difficulty.

""The Other babies of Bethlehem."

" Susanna and Jehoiachim were two young parents, both twenty three years old , just getting started in life together. They had one child little David, who at eighteen months had learned to walk and was getting into everything, was putting little sentences together in strange ways. A healthy happy child he was the delight of their life. They named him David because they lived in the city of David- Bethlehem --as their village was called. -located just a few miles south of Jerusalem.

Late one night while everyone was sleeping , the king's soldiers surrounded the village, and at first light they came into the town. They ordered all parents with small children into the village square, made a search to ensure that none remained, and without a word killed every little boy two years and under. " Orders " they said.

After the horror of that day had receded enough for the villagers to take account, they discovered that twenty one children had been killed.

It is a cruel world, and such things happen. In our own time thousands of babies have been napalmed, gassed, starved and shot by the order or permission of unfeeling governments.

But human beings are resilient creatures and after periods of numbness, anger, bitterness, and acceptance, Jehoiachin and Susanna were able to pick up the pieces of their life and go on.

Without hostility or condescension they rejected the explanations of well meaning relations and neighbours who sought to describe the tragedy as " God's will" or the inscrutable purpose of God. They had no real answers to the question that their own bible and prayer book raised" My God, My God -Why ??

They even began to find new meaning in synagogue worship.

Until one day when they discovered that on the crucial night before the slaughter of the baby boys an angel of the Lord had come from God to warn one family to escape and that they had been secure in Egypt , the little boy Jesus was alive, but not their little David."

New Interpreters Bible

This is the story of a miracle, of divine intervention in the normal course of events. It calls for reflection. When told in the above manner, the story raises questions not only of history (Did/ could such things actually happen?)

but also of ethics (Should such things happen?)

If God works in ways that angels may warn persons of impending danger , is it right that only one family is actually warned? Which of us with such information and ability to save, would share it with one family and withhold it from twenty one others? Not only this story --but also every miracle story as well , raises such questions. The story of the healing of a blind person is wonderful, unless it is heard from the perspective of all those blind persons in the world who were not healed?

When the story of the "slaughter of the innocents" is presented in the above manner, it can bring two types of responses. -- Perhaps you may have started on one of these tracks already.

(1) Those who think that the biblical accounts of miracles are being attacked may feel obliged to defend and offer explanations for them.

"If God had warned all the parents in Bethlehem, Herod would have grown suspicious and perhaps killed everyone in the village. He was that kind of person. So altho what happened was bad it would have been far worse if God had worked the miracle for all the parents of little boys."

Or "God was speaking to everyone in the village, but only Joseph and Mary were sensitive enough to hear God's voice."--

None of this is biblical of course.

The other response is more extreme.(2) There is an inherent problem with all miracles and we should dispense with these stories altogether. Although these two responses may seem to be poles apart, they do share one thing in common. They take the language of the miracle stories as objective." reporter language. If it is true they would claim it is open to the same interpretation of any other reporter language.

The retelling of the gospel story from the point of view of Jehoiachin and Susanna may help us to see the fallacy of this assumption.

And after all anyone who has had any contact with the media knows that reporter language is not necessarily objective but interpretative. The truth of this gospel is not whether it literally happened or not, but that it represents Matthew's understanding and the Church's confession that God was active in preserving the infant Jesus for his future mission.

That is the essential truth of this gospel - not that God was neglecting the other infants who were killed. Yet some may still feel that the words --the interpretation "" this was to fulfil what had been spoken of by the Lord through the prophet" is designed to express the truth that this was God's will.

Indeed those words are used to describe God's action in preserving the infant Jesus but later when referring to the slaughter of the Holy Innocents there is a subtle change of language.

"Then was fulfilled what had been spoken by the prophet Jeremiah." By this subtle change, the author suggests that the slaughter of the innocents fulfils Scripture , but is not directly willed by God.

God who is all knowing foresees the atrocities that humans commit in defiance of his will , but we must not negate human responsibility by attributing Herod's massacre or any in our time to God's intent or will.

God's sovereignty and human freewill must not be confused. The number of times I have heard well meaning but mistaken people say of some great tragedy --either personal or social --" it is a matter of acceptance of God's will " That makes God responsible for some of the most hideous crimes and tragedies in human history.

Rather we can say that God knows the consequence of human actions and the exercise of our free will - but that he does not normally intervene to stop their consequences --otherwise we would have a world without any order or rhyme or reason.

I know that when I have faced personal tragedy the words that helped were not those who spoke of God's will or inscrutability --but of friends who were able to say " God is in it with you ; suffering with you and loving you through this dark hour."

Yes the question of suffering and miracle do raise difficult questions for us to get our hearts and minds around. " How can we believe in a good God in a world like this when?? ---" is perhaps the most common question that makes it difficult for some folk to have faith in God.

We should not compound the difficulties by drawing a picture of a monster God who moves humans around like pawns on a chess board. Rather we understand that we live in a world where there is cause and effect. Where God usually allows the consequence of human freewill . Yet we know that in the pain and tragedy of life he is not aloof from our pain and suffering but shares it with us.

We come in a few moments --to the Intercessions. Yes. we will pray for peace in the most unlikely situations, for healing and restoration of the sick and suffering. Such prayers are also part of a world of cause and effect and even if on many occasions the effect

is not what we would necessarily want, we have the assurance that the one we worship at this Christmas season is Emmanuel --God with us."

The gospel of the Holy Innocents presents that same truth. that Christmas is not something from an idyllic , unreal world but shares and faces the same brutal facts as our world today. That the child who has been born , guided, protected and guided represents the initiative of God in calling the one who was born and preserved as the Son of God.--Emmanuel --God with us " -Yesterday , today and for ever."

Christmas does not evade or minimise the tragedies of life' rather it offers a love and grace that holds us even when we seem past feeling and empowers us with the presence of the one who is Emmanuel - God with us.