

Reflection 26th December 2010

Last Sunday night I was sitting in Church, enjoying the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols. I looked into the congregation and saw that it was not as popular as the carols that are held in Rotary Park, or the televised 'Carols by Candlelight' that come from the Myer Music Bowl. So that difference set me thinking.

This may seem strange, but it set me thinking about the resurrection! I remember once visiting a friend in England, whose husband had recently died. She knew that I was a clergyman, and asked me "Well what do you think will happen to 'X' " I started to speak about the resurrection of the body (It's in the creed) and after a little while, I felt uncomfortable. I got the feeling that the whole world of ideas that I was living in, that gives me hope about life and death, was different to this person's. They said at the end 'Well that sounds like a load of ##### to me' I decided at that time, that the world of some people is so far from the world of following Jesus, that it is better not to speak about it, because of that very gap. It is becoming evermore true, that the gap between common beliefs and Christian beliefs is increasing.

The way that beliefs evolve is that 'big themes' get grafted onto existing ideas. So the idea of 'the miracle of birth' and the 'wonder of new life' in human terms, gets grafted onto Jesus' birth. Christmas becomes a family celebration because for most

people family relationships are the most immediate and powerful relationships, and birth itself, reproduction, is a miracle that everyone can 'get with' if not participate in. The other themes that collect around Christmas are 'Going Home', and 'Giving and Getting' and the idea of a 'present'.

So the beliefs that we hold tap into our deepest longings, and then are given focus when we make use of the stories that are around to give these unspoken longings shape.

Now to Advent. My first encounter with the idea of a 'Vigil' was when I read the stories of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. Before a knight went on a quest, he would spend the whole night beforehand praying in Church. He would 'stay awake', he would 'watch' so that he would be *prepared* for the quest. He would allow the seriousness of what he was about to do impinge itself upon him. He would let the call of God to go on this quest motivate the 'why' and 'how' of this quest. He would fast. As a young person, I was mightily impressed by this preparation. I was again mightily impressed, as I encountered Anglicanism, that we too had 'Fasts' and 'Vigils'. Advent is a 'fast'. It is a time of self denial and reflection on the meaning of the coming of the Christ. We keep this fast so that we are prepared at Christmas to celebrate 'The Word made Flesh'. Advent is like Lent, only shorter, and a bit 'lighter'. But we too keep 'vigil'. We get a

touch of this vigil quality of Advent when we sing in "O Little Town of Bethlehem" *'While mortals sleep the angels keep their watch of wondering love.'*

So at Advent, we keep 'watch'. Like the knights of old, We place our 'hopes and fears' in the context of God's story. We let our beliefs be shaped by the story of God with God's people. God arrives in Flesh, not just to bless the miracle of human birth, but to announce the beginning of the reign of God, which will allow us to live in ways that match with God's will. There will be justice, there will be peace, there will be mercy. As we heard last week in the story of Joseph, the most shameful of circumstances will be redeemable.

So this is what we do on the last Sunday in Advent. We read the story in the Bible, which gives us the context of hope into which the birth of Jesus is to be understood. We do this too at Easter during what is called the 'Easter Vigil'. We watch and pray and read the story of Jesus' coming and death. The text of 'Handel's Messiah' is also a version of the 'Nine Lessons and Carols' except that there are more excerpts from Scripture, and the ones from Genesis, describing the 'fallen' condition of humanity are omitted.

To immerse ourselves in these realities is to let our deepest longings be shaped in ways that will really satisfy them. It is to allow another 'story' to

be a reality in our lives rather than just the story of being human, that is shaped by the forces of the culture in which we live.

It is really sad for me that the longer I live, the greater, even in the Church, becomes the pressure to abandon the practices that would immerse us in God's story, for the sake of attracting the people, who do not know this story, to some version of it. We go 'Christianity lite' for the sake of the people who aren't having any Christianity at all.

In this case, we must expect not to be popular. But at the same time, as Christians, we must not let ourselves be shifted off being immersed in God's story. We must also find ways of engaging with those people who are yet to discover Christ such that they see the depth of life with God. We must think about ways of helping people to make the journey from being part of 'the crowd' to being 'disciples.' Keeping the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols is one way of letting ourselves be immersed in God's story at Christmas, while not forgetting our own 'deepest longings'

Your 'Companion on The Way' and Priest



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