

Sunday 17 December 2023 – Glimpsing An Advent Truth

Mark Newitt's meditation poem was specially written for this third Sunday of Advent, when we focus on the witness of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and also celebrate the licensing of Beth Keith as fulltime preacher in this church and parish.

Readings:

Isaiah 61:1–4, 8–end. Luke 1:36–38, 46–55.

Sermon: - Glimpsing an Advent Truth – Mark Newitt

With thanks/apologies to: John Betjeman, Trevor Dennis, Martyn Joseph, Michael Leunig, G.A. Studdert Kennedy, R.S. Thomas, W.H. Vanstone, and the unknown author of the Basque carol Gabriel's Message. There is also a reference to René Girard, The Evangelical Subversion of Myth. Girard was a French anthropologist, historian and philosopher who is best known for his insight into the innate human propensity to mimic one another, and thus to create enmity and violence. Christianity has the power to subvert that force of nature.

“Don't be afraid,” the angel says, messenger with eyes as flame,
“A blessed mother thou shalt be.” Gabriel's words do proclaim.
“How shall this be?” Mary responds, her ‘Yes’ has hesitation,
“For nothing is impossible...” the angel's attestation:
Good news shall come to the oppressed, all broken hearts shall be bound,
to captives comes their liberty, and those who mourn shall be crowned
with a garland rather than ash. People who the Lord has blessed
is how they shall be acknowledged. With salvation they are dressed
and as the earth brings forth its shoots, righteousness and praise shall spring
up for all of creation leaps and of God's glory does sing.
For surely God is all around when looking with attention:
in making peace and forgiving, a Bach three-part invention,
in gorse that flowers ev'n in frost, the lifted wing of a swan,
in the kindness of a stranger, in friendships we depend on,
in drifted snow on mountain peaks, in the wonder of a hike,
in the rotational motion of a wheel upon a bike,
in whistle-blowing where whistles should be blown to make it clear
that something that is not quite right seem to be going on here,
in unexpected courtesy, in leaves that have turned to gold,
in banter of hospital wards, in the courage of the old,
in clouds unravelled by the wind, in all standing firm for truth,
in finding of all mystery, in the innocence of youth,
in all making of connection, in the vast expanse of space,
in giving of all dignity and in unexpected grace.

Yet, things are not all sweetness, light, where we face life with a grin.
Scratch any arm and blood of pain comes fast welling to the skin.
The lowly seem not lifted up, raw sewage in rivers spew,
global temperatures are rising, the hungry still for food queue.
Conflict in so many countries; Israel, Ukraine, Palestine,
plus the places that have drifted out the news and the headline.
And I've yet to mention earthquakes, floods or infectious disease,
systematic rape and murder, rainforests stripped of their trees,
homes and habitation destroyed through uncontrolled wildfires,
silenced political pris'ners their nails pulled off with pliers,

or those scared waves will swamp the boat as a safer life they seek,
or females in Afghanistan with a future looking bleak.
Corruption, coercion, cruel-ty, the military in their pay;
living a life of luxury while their country does decay.
Dictators, and those who would be, cling to their self-proclaimed throne
while, around the world in crisis, adults cry and children moan.

This most tremendous tale of all seems hardly true, hardly true,
and the only hue that I've seen is where faiths bruised me deep blue.
However hard I look these times God isn't easily found
for the problem raised by evil is increasingly profound.
Theodicy the name they give to attempts to justify,
though my instinct's to be wary of all explanations why.
For suffering cannot be solved like the sum of two plus two.
It's not a murder mystery that we fathom clue by clue.
More it's mystery we enter and entering it we find
that the more that we discover, the more there is to unwind.
So here it is to paradox, and its tensions I submit
seeing truth as multivalent not confined by holy writ.
Augustine said our restless hearts will find, O Lord, rest in you.
To some extent I do agree, but de Mello's also true
who said that if we rest in Christ, we will never rest again;
there is no promise of a life free from trauma to remain.
For all the joy of Mary's song, the hope that she does extol,
she soon shall hear from Simeon, 'A sword shall pierce your own soul'.
To gain our life, the gospel says, we must prepare to lose it.
'gainst the world's view of what is strong, to weakness we should admit.
And so I hold these contrary truths with both my faith and my doubt,
believing and not believing while trying not to burn out.
Then what is the hope I cling to when the world in pain does cry?

Two thousand years back I travel for light and love to espy,
to the miracle of new life, to a little baby boy,
such is the unlikely setting for my gestating of joy.
But not to the sanitized tale so often regaled again,
of journeys and a moving star, of birth without any pain,
of shepherds smelling of angels, and the wisest Magi kings –
who somehow get lost on the way – then offer the gift each brings,
of a mother who does not tire, a babe who never once cries,
and a man who minds not this kid may well be some other guy's.
Really there is another way this narrative we should trace:
pregnant teenager, carpenter, an insignificant place.
Social standing, wealth and good health, are not signs of God's glory;
familiarity can mask the scandal of this story.
For, in this womb, a Lord of Lords lies vulnerable from the start,
a God who ends up crucified, with a spear thrust through his heart.
A God who's witnessed suffering and joy at its most sublime;
creation's wisdom, incarnate, within the fabric of time.
Love that holds us all in being, is no romantic cliché,
it will pass through fire and water being another's mainstay.
And love seeks not for its own gain, but forever looks to serve;
the greatest must a servant be, so the gospel does observe.

This is the hope I hold on to when little seems to make sense,
that hidden is loves agony its endeavour and expense.
That love is born, yes love is born, with a dark and troubled face
when hope seems all but redundant, and in an unlikely place.
And while I may not understand, may struggle at times to see,
God intimately wove through life means no place that God can't be.
For though our human selfishness may create a living hell
there's no one beyond redemption, the divine in all does dwell.
This living out of paradox doesn't mean a compromise.
It's not an amalgamation, neither side needs to demise.
Instead, each may keep their fullness, leading to a real contrast:
meekness and majesty in Christ, times for feasting and to fast,
grief and glory, dazzling darkness, just a few more to narrate,
(paradox is always better if it will aliterate!).

Within the gospel narrative, these golden threads, I do see
the unfolding revelation of another way to be.
Another way the dance of life may wondrously be performed.
Another way that people's lives may graciously be transformed.
And while I view much as a myth and not told as pure hist'ry
the truth wrapped in the stories folds is a great epiphany.
A Girardian subverting of our mimetic desire
that opens up another way abundance to acquire.
For in the life of he who came Immanuel born on earth,
in the common things he valued and proclaimed of priceless worth,
in pouring out and emptying – not acting like a diva –
in presence that's found in absence, the *Via Negativa*,
in justice, mercy, righteousness, in love that's freely given
there is the hope for all the world, a priceless kingdom vision.
For the task of Magnificat is not God's alone, you see,
God's 'yes' to us in sending Christ is unavoidably
bound up with the need for a 'yes' from a human in reply.

And just as it was with Mary, the same to us does apply;
through God's gracious initiative God seeks out other actor's
who in bringing in the Kingdom are significant factors.
In her licensing here today, Beth, as fulltime, we install.
It's the next step in her journey of responding to God's call.
And while we pray for God's blessing as she gives voice to her 'yes',
the call to reveal the kingdom is for us all to finesse.
'gainst individualism's cult and the me-first society
I see ourselves as called to build interconnectivity.
For wherever people gather and wherever love is shown,
wherever hospitality is given to the unknown,
wherever vulnerability is allowed space to survive,
then human beings can flourish becoming truly alive.
In being yeast, and salt, and light, we may not have it painless;
there are too many in this world who's lust for power is shameless.
So living out another way will not come without a price
(though pray we do not have to pay the ultimate sacrifice).
But when life in all its fullness, paradoxes are our choice,
we shall be oaks of righteousness, we shall exult and rejoice.

By angelic heavenly guidance may our pathway be unfurled
for the one who's steps we follow is the light of all the world.

Thus, throughout this Advent season, may we not be held in thrall
to sanitised nativity that offers no hope at all,
but urgent for incarnation, immersed in Immanuel,
with rumour of revolution and hint that all shall be well.
For the annunciation's more than messenger from above,
it's an invite to add our 'Yes' to redemption's work of love.

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