

Fourth Sunday of Advent Year B

Advent is both the end and the beginning of the Christian year. It begins by pointing us to the end of all things in the fulfilment of God's mission of love, and then leads us gently through some key moments and key people in the story of that mission of love, especially in relation to the coming of Jesus

Old Testament

2 Sam 7: 1-11, 16

Two narratives are being played out here, one theological the other political and historical. They are both about David's promise to build a temple for God, to house the ultimate symbol of God's presence with God's people – the Ark of the Covenant. In the longer section of this reading, God reveals to Nathan, in a dream, that God is not hankering after a temple to live in. In the dream God states that, so far from David building God a house, God will build a "house" – that is, a dynasty – that will endure for ever. God will also give to the people a place to live, a permanent home. So, the first message is that "places" are for people, not for God.

Underlying this narrative – or perhaps in parallel with it – is another one. During the period of history that covered the interval between the patriarchs and the settlement in the Promised Land of Canaan important changes were taking place in human culture. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were pastoralists, nomadic wanderers who moved from place to place looking for the best grazing for the flocks. The conquest and settlement of Canaan ushered in a quite different pattern of human existence – that of the farmer settled permanently in one place. Pastoralist and farmer were constantly at loggerheads over land; they argued over the rights and wrongs of their respective ways of life, an argument that underlies the dark tale of Cain and Abel right back in Genesis chapter 4. Part of their rivalry took the form of a tussle about how to represent God's presence among them. The Pastoralists wanted to enshrine the God who had led them across the wilderness, whose Ark they had to carry with them from one encampment to another. The Agriculturists wanted to reflect that "this is our place and God is here with us". They wanted a fixed, permanent home for God, to reflect their settled lifestyle.

Luke 1:46-55 The Magnificat

The Credit Crunch has toppled the mighty from their thrones, the rich go away empty as the mighty men of high finance find themselves out of work. The rich are sent away empty, but are the hungry filled? In our response to the Credit Crunch, as voters, as customers, as investors, can we meaningfully assess our decision-making in relation to the plight of the hungry, those who may be less able to respond to unemployment and hard times. This wonderful poem, like the poem in Isaiah 61, expresses the true character of God, God's values, concerns, intentions and hopes for all his people regardless of race or

faith. As we share in Mary's song, we are not simply resting on the truth about God; we are conforming ourselves to that truth. One of the New Testament writers spoke enigmatically about "doing the truth". Here is our guidepost.

Or

Ps 89: 1-4, 19-26

This psalm is a celebration of David's kingship. Despite his disastrous lapse from grace, when he took a fancy to Bathsheba and engineered the death of her husband Uriah, David's name and reputation stood unchallenged as the greatest of all the kings. Indeed, the name David was almost the touchstone for the idea of the divinely appointed and anointed king, God's vice-regent. It is important that we do not confuse David's personal history, with its glories and its shame, with the concept of divine kingship as a central part of the covenant between God and God's people. It's not that David himself is important; David is important only insofar as he represents God's kingly rule over the covenant people,

We read this passage (and others of similar import) at Christmas to remind ourselves of this idea which has focussed the identity of God's people for so many generations. As Christians we see the fulfilment of this concept in Jesus Christ.

Epistle Rom 16: 25-27

These, the closing verses of the letter to the Romans, declare a belief whose significance I suspect we often overlook: the incarnation of God in Jesus was a plan conceived long before the events we remember at Christmas. This raises a theological issue of great importance. To what extent is it right to view the coming of Jesus as a divine rescue mission – God's Plan B – to a world that had got itself into deep trouble? From these wonderful words of Paul there is another possible way of looking at the coming of Jesus. It was God's plan all along that at some point (and it is not for us to second-guess the criteria which made a particular moment the right moment) God would extend to humanity the fullest, most direct revelation of God's nature that humans are capable of grasping. The Incarnation, the birth of Jesus, is part of God's creative purpose and has been all along. Redemption is no afterthought, but integral to Creation.

Gospel Luke 1: 26-38

So familiar are these words that it is easy for us to miss their deep significance. For Mary, it is quite hard to see how this announcement could be, unequivocally, either good news or any kind of privilege. On the contrary, at first blush it looked more like a grave scandal. Would such a scandal be more readily tolerated in a small provincial town than in the great city of Jerusalem? It's hard to say.

Luke's stories of the birth of Jesus are set in the very humblest of situations. No diplomatic or state visit, no VIP lounges, no media pack, greeted either the announcement or the fact of Jesus' coming. All conventional human expectations are blown away by Luke's account - which is why, of course, Luke pens the marvellous hymn we know as the Magnificat. It draws on Jewish tradition - see 1 Samuel chapter 2 - but it stands alone because the child whose birth is celebrated is none other than God's Son.