

First Sunday of Christmas Year B

For many people Christmas is more-or-less over, but in truth the Christmas season is in full swing. In these quiet days between Christmas and New Year we have an opportunity to absorb the deep significance of the event we have just celebrated.

Old Testament

Isa 61:10 – 62:3

Chapter 61 began with the prophet's mission statement – a passage used by Jesus, in Luke 4, as his own mission statement. This establishes the context against which we must read our lection: the anointed prophet, speaking for the Lord, has his own life too. As a servant he is, in himself, both burdened ("I will not rest", 62:1) and exultant (61:10).

This passage can be read simply as an exuberant outburst of utter confidence in the Lord. But cannot it also be read as a shout of joy as simply being alive to the knowledge of God's anointing spirit? The prophet is thankful for his own salvation, he has a clear vocation, he has a message of hope to share, and a clarion-call to his contemporaries to join him in what almost amounts to a crusade to "establish Jerusalem and make her the praise of the earth" (62:7).

Ps 148

The psalmist is almost going "over the top" here, sensing in his own personal joy that the whole creation is singing with him. A moment's thought will bring a touch of sobriety to this celebration; it's hard to imagine a herd of gazelles praising the Lord as they quietly graze on the African plains, knowing that a cheetah might be hiding behind that scrubby bush over there. So we have to read this, surely, as hyperbolic, as exaggeration. Read this way it certainly works.

So what is our reaction? Do we share – have we ever shared – feelings that are anything like those surging through the psalmist's being as he writes? It is too easy, in letting one's thought meander down those ways, to accumulate feelings of guilt about not having the experience that someone else has had and about which he is so very articulate. But we cannot manufacture such feelings. It might be salutary to revisit Psalm 131, and look elsewhere, for reminders that there is a tension between on the one hand high spiritual ambition and on the other contentment. This tension was well expressed by the hymn-writer Adelaide Procter: *we have enough yet not too much to ask for more* (Hymns and Psalms 564, v 4)

Gal 4: 4-7

This brief reading is a fine example of Paul's amazing theological agility. He really does cut the mustard as a bold stroke-maker. And there's hardly a word wasted!

Paul identifies a particular human condition as requiring corrective action: *under the law*. What might this mean? The Law – the Torah – as set out for example in the book of Leviticus – is concerned primarily with ritual purity. Look for example at Leviticus 18 – a chapter which has become notorious in recent years because of its strictures on homosexuality. This chapter is prefaced by a strict injunction against adopting the religious practices of Egypt and of Canaan, lest they draw the people aside from the true way of Yahweh. Later on we find that “leprosy” (translated in the Good News Bible as “a dreaded skin disease”, and almost certainly not at all what we now call leprosy) is of concern not primarily because the individual is ill and needs to recover, for his own sake; rather, the primary concern is that because there is a discontinuity in his skin his life might leak away. This threatens the purity of the community, which is why the sufferer must be isolated, at least temporarily, from the community.

So “the law” is a bit of a mixture – part moral prudence, part religious purity regulation. Although its motivation was entirely worthy – the integrity of the relationship between the people and God – it did nourish the idea that salvation (shalom) was secured by strict performance of prescribed duties, and penalties where necessary. In turn this hangs on – or promotes – a particular understanding of God which, in the light of the gospel, Paul found to be inadequate. He points to the true nature of that relationship, that of child to parent – a relationship created by God’s covenant grace.

Gospel Luke 2: 22-40

Following the announcement by angels, the shepherds visit the baby Jesus. We are sometimes spooked by the idea of angels. Do they exist or not? The biblical tradition is clear; angels are messengers of God, and they are not always readily recognised as such. Indeed recognition often comes after the event.

Now this is a statement about the biblical tradition – what people believed between roughly two and three thousand years ago. Whether or not it obliges us to believe in angels is a quite different question. You may want to ask a slightly different question: does God communicate with us today, and if so how does God do it?

There is of course a second thread in this story. It’s about angels, but it is also, surely, about shepherds. In New Testament times the shepherding profession had what we might call a mixed press. In Ezekiel the image of the shepherd is used as a metaphor for Godly leadership. When that “Godly leadership” is negligent or corrupt the consequences for God’s people are indeed dire. Ezekiel’s image – which Jesus himself took up later in John chapter 10 – reflects a high view of the role of the shepherd in defending the flock against human and animal predators.

But Luke has singled out shepherds as the first humans to worship the infant Jesus after Mary and Joseph. Many commentators claim that in fact the social

status of the shepherd was very lowly indeed. One might say that they were the “usual suspects” targeted when there were complaints of anti-social behaviour. This is certainly in line with Luke’s consistent emphasis on the ill-favoured and the disadvantaged, the marginalised and the excluded as being in some way *privileged observers* of the ministry of Jesus. Refer back to Luke 6:20ff for Luke’s very direct and forthright commendation of the poor as “blessed”.