

Sermon for Sunday 3rd January 2021 (Christmas 2) Fr. Mike

- [Jer.31. 7-14](#)
- [Ephesians 1. 3-14](#)
- [John 1. \(1-9\) 10-18](#)

Please listen to the carol 'O Little Town of Bethlehem' (track 11 on CD) before reading on...

Just as Joseph did as he was told to do, by honouring his agreement to marry Mary and get on with his job, so we as Christians in the 21st Century need to restore the basic values and tenets of our faith. **Q/** How do we do that?

A/ By re-defining our present power structures, because until we do that we will never get back onto the course which Jesus began for us – and at the moment we seem to be on a diversion of our own...

Are we in danger of sanitizing the Gospel?

The Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff once remarked that “The logic of power is the desire for more power.” There is nothing new in this comment for anyone who looks at either past or present world and church history. We need to return to our source, so that what is ‘born in us today’ by virtue of our trip to Bethlehem (the house of bread) is the rising of an enlightened church that ushers in a new kingdom.

This ‘new’ covenant is only, after all, the product of what was born in the heart of the ‘old’ church all those years ago in Bethlehem. The gospel has seemingly renounced the centralization of power and yet our church system doesn’t always reflect that which Jesus Christ intended it to reflect. We are in danger of becoming bourgeois. If you were comfortable with today’s Gospel, then perhaps you are already Bourgeois?

The modern church has travelled very far from the ideals that our 1st Century ancestors would be prepared to die for... the early Christians didn’t go to the lions so that future Christians could become a bourgeois distortion of their sacrifice. They were trying to build a kingdom with God at the

centre, and the Emperor who ruled the known world at the time could not contain it in any other way than to give it the real 'kiss of death' by institutionalizing the faith. The faith which made him annoyed; the faith which made him worthless; the new faith which made brutality a laughing- stock; how shrewd was that Emperor?!

Jesus did not come to ratify the establishment. He came to reorganise it, so that life was completely unrecognisable, and a new dimension could begin. Just like the arrival of any new baby into a family – chaotic!

Jesus was then, a dramatic change on the face of world history. Yet the way we seem to treat change in the church is to make it comfortable, taking as many people along with us as gently as possible, trying to offend no-one. **Has anyone ever experienced a painless, tidy birth?** Our heritage and history surely offers countless examples of travail in this area.

Christmas reminds us to get our act together as a community. John reminds us that keeping Christ in the crib is a travesty of our corporate calling. The crib alone is far too safe, sugary, and sentimental – but unfortunately for most people the comfortable crib is where Jesus remains...

Little babies are generally cute. Little babies mostly smile a lot. Yes, they also cry and make a bit of trouble, but the bottom line is that most times adults can ultimately control them. We stay in control. If all else fails, we can simply have the power to shut the door and let them bawl! For the most part then, babies seem to be fine. It is only when they start growing up, talking, asking awkward questions, behaving in ways that we don't like (especially when they embarrass us with disarming statements of truth!) that the situation begins to become less comfortable. This was the Christ experience. As soon as he opened his mouth and started saying things that people didn't like, he was no longer cute – he became 'blasphemous,' a 'threat' - and this is our destiny too!

Sometimes, we need to get under people's skin, because it is not a comfortable Gospel that we are asked to live. If you are happy with your faith, if you are contented with what Christ seems to be saying to you in your life, then you have probably misunderstood what he is asking. However, please

be careful. I am not actually suggesting that we have a masochistic faith or we are never meant to be happy. What I am saying, is that whatever we do, it will never be enough; however hard we pray – it's not enough; Whatever 'good works' we perform – they are no more than we ought to do if we want our soul to be like Jeremiah foretold - '**as a watered garden... and not sorrow any more at all**' (Jer. 31.12) with the young and old dancing and rejoicing together.

Sadly, as we regularly manufacture bullets and weapons in this country and then seem to sell them to anyone with the money to buy them, consequently we are currently a country of hypocrisy that seriously compromises the Gospel of the Prince of Peace. Strange how a country that can in normal times (before COVID19) sing "Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm all is bright...sleep in heavenly peace" yet behave so irresponsibly? Our parliament still begins its sessions with 'prayers' but surely they are hollow when all that prevails is a market-forces spirituality that makes a mockery of all that Christ came to change. Are Christians speaking out loudly enough? Is there any outrage? Does our Episcopal leadership regularly hold our increasingly secular government to account on behalf of the true government *they* represent? (Speaking 'truth to power' in and out of season as it were...)

Conclusions

It may appear that the politicians we elect have elevated their policy of market forces almost into a spirituality in this land – at the expense of the disarmingly simple Christian message. If so, we remain poor indeed, and the work of Christmas is yet to begin.

Faith is only Incarnational, is only truly made present, through personal witness. It is 'born in us today' by how we behave, and how we behave therefore reflects the way Christ is actually received in the world.

So, how can we become more vibrant acolytes of the Gospel in today's world? When we begin to renounce a certain type of worldly power in order to be vested with a more potent '**power to become the sons of God**' (v.12).

When the song of the angels is stilled; when the star in the sky is gone; when the kings and princes are home; when the shepherds are back with their flocks – the true work of Christmas can begin:

To find the lost; to heal the broken; to feed the hungry; to release the prisoner; to rebuild the Nations; to bring peace among people, and Christ in your heart!

The Truth then (i.e. God's truth) is always more important than the feelings and delicate sensibilities of human beings – who are ready to be offended at the earliest opportunity on most occasions. Even Joseph felt a bit hard done by, and didn't quite understand what to do – so God sent an angel, a messenger, to explain the situation to him. Likewise, John the Baptist was sent to us, **'to bear witness of that Light, that all through him might believe'** (v.7). Therefore, together with every subsequent Christian, we have signed up to this work of 'bearing witness' to redefine 'power.'

We already have the Law (from Moses) **'but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ'** (v17).

It remains our abiding Christian assumption that although people can *become* complicated, they are fundamentally good. However, they are seldom *consistent* in that goodness, which is why laws and moral codes are never enough to fully maintain humanity. So, there was a clear need for **grace and truth** (which arrived in Christ) to make us simple again; empowering all humanity to be **'holy and without blame before him in love'** as Paul echoes today (v.4).

In this world of *sin* (i.e. that sometimes, by virtue of being human, has a wrong relationship with God) the abiding Good News this season, which gives us all Hope, is perhaps the following most powerful phrase from the carol: namely, that in this world of sin ***'where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.'***

Amen!

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