

I had occasion in the week just past to attend a service of worship which left me rather disappointed. It was not that a lot of preparation had not been put into the service, or the number of people present (only a few). Actually, it took a while to work out what was “wrong”, but in the end it seemed to me that the whole thing was all too glib. Being a service of the season, references to peace, joy, and love were made in abundance, but there was lacking the realism of the gospel – that which gives these good things their weight and substance.

Then, later in the week, an edited extract of a lecture by Justice Michael Kirby was published in one of our newspapers,¹ in which he declared that the most important thing he has discovered is love – “Love for one another. Love for our community. Love for others everywhere in the world”. Yet this, too, smacked of the glib. His concluding remark was, “...we surely know how lucky we are if we still enjoy consciousness, rationality and love. But the greatest of these is love.” Now, anyone who has ever been to a wedding will recognise that last line as a strange mutilation of St Paul’s discussion of love in 1 Corinthians 13. Yet it makes some sense that Kirby would use it in this way, for the use of that passage from Paul in weddings usually helps us along the way to missing the whole point of what he said in its original context. The “love” Paul wrote of is not what two lovers feel for each other and what brings them to the matrimonial altar, but something which was *missing* among those he wrote to. Paul wrote not out of sentiment but to unpack just how *hard* it is to “love”; there is nothing glib here.

Our gospel reading this morning does not touch directly on the themes of love, joy or peace, and yet the temptation to glibness in reading it is strong. The thing which perhaps most directly catches our attention is the reference to Mary’s virginity. The virginal conception² is, to most people, a sticking point for belief. Either we believe it because it’s in the Bible or because we believe that God can intervene in the world in that way, or we disbelieve it because we believe that God doesn’t act in the world in that way. By

¹ *The Age*, December 17 2009

² “Virginal conception:” as distinct from the *virgin birth* (the belief that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life, her hymen remaining unbroken despite bearing a number of children) and the *immaculate conception* (which refers to the conception and birth of Mary herself, a doctrine arising as a qualification on the doctrine of original sin).

comparison, the rest of the reading is more or less OK – even, I’d suggest, the appearance of the angel and the general content of his message about Mary’s son.

Yet here – in the general appeal of the angel’s message – the glibness quickly slips in again. The thing about the virginal conception is that it doesn’t allow for sentimental glibness. We can sit with the promise or “idea” of a great leader bringing God’s love and peace. But we must choose with respect to the virginal conception. Even if we’re not quite sure what it means, we make a decision about whether we will raise our voices or lower them when we come to that part of the Creed. It is the same, of course, with other equally problematic aspects of the Creed. Peace, joy, love, hope, these remain, but the purportedly historical specifics can be discarded, it usually seems to us.

Yet, in tossing out the virgin conception we discard the only thing in the whole passage which might jolt us back into awareness of that to which the season of Christmas would draw us. At least at Easter time we have a dead body to contend with, which colours the talk of resurrection. At Christmas we are too easily tempted to go all misty-eyed when we hear, “unto us a son is born”, for when is this *not* good news in itself? Whatever might have happened to Mary, we find at least some peace, joy and love in children conceived the usual way. And this becomes for us the meaning of Christmas; just think of the sentimental piece “When a child is born” which is played so often at this time of the year.

Now, there is nothing wrong with sentiment, or with peace, love, joy and hope as we know them in part. But glibness about these things is a matter of untruth and self-deception. I’ve spoken a bit over the last few weeks about desire, and the way in which the coming of God is a coming as the “desire of nations”. It could be said that our desires are summarised in our talk of peace, love, joy; that all that we do is oriented towards realising these desires, and all that we suffer is a challenge to what presence there is of the things we desire in our lives already.

But we do ourselves no favours with cheap mantras about what we desire. To affirm that “the greatest is love”, to desire or to *wish* for peace and joy, is not to bring these things about. We simply deceive ourselves about what these things might actually cost us. Recall our poem

this morning, in which Mary speaks of her son as
*...caught
that I might be free, blind in my womb
to know my darkness ended,
brought to this birth for me to be new-
born,
and for him to see me mended
I must see him torn.*³

There is a shock here – love will cost, as will peace and joy it brings. To imply anything else is to obscure the truth about these things.

And this brings us to the question of the “truth” of the virginal conception. It is perhaps strange to put it this way, but the truth of the virginal conception is in its “untruth”. That is, the very impossibility of what Mary is said to experience is the point of saying it, and in this impossibility we have a brief statement of the whole of the gospel.

This is not to suggest that “Do you believe in the virginal conception” is not a question we will be asked at the Pearly Gates. Even within the gospels it hardly features at all; Matthew and Luke could have made the same point in their proclamation of Jesus as the Christ had they omitted the Christmas stories altogether. But the real problem with the Christmas story in Luke is not the Annunciation and its reference to the Virgin, but the Magnificat – which we’ll sing as a doxology in a moment. In Mary’s song we will sing of an extraordinary, and wholly “unbelievable” re-ordering of the world. More than this, it is a painful re-ordering and no mere washing over us of love and peace and joy, for there is to be a lifting up of the lowly and a casting down of the high. The point is that this is a change of the same order, the same significance, the same rupturing of the normal way of things as what is said will happen to Mary herself. God will enter the world, and the world will be changed.

If we could grasp this thought, we would say the Creed differently. When we come to “born of the virgin Mary”, the emphasis would now fall on “Mary”, and not on “virgin”. “Virgin” simply becomes an adjective describing *which* Mary it is we are talking about. It is more important to grasp that the one named “Christ, Son, Lord” becomes a part of the world as we know it, a world filled with Marys, Josephs, shepherds and kings, all themselves filled with longing for peace, joy, love, but none with a concrete, clearly contoured hope as to what it might look like or how it might come about. We are so used to the humanity of Jesus that the “Mary” of the creed seems obvious. Yet the scandal of Christian faith – and the reason the middle part of the Creed is the longest – is the suggestion that in Jesus we

meet not only a man with a mother(!) but God himself, the very presence of the joy, peace, love that we so long for.

The miracle which is at the heart of the Christian gospel is not how Jesus is said to have been born, not any of the wonders he is said to have performed, not even the Resurrection, but the Crucifixion, for here we have the definitive sign of the extent to which God can enter into our world – “even to death on a cross” (Philippians 2.8). This, St John tells us, is the sign of love – not our wish for love and peace but God in Jesus upon the cross (1 John 4.9f): “...for him to see me mended, I must see him torn.”

The content of our hope is not simply “love”, “joy”, “peace”. We will know it as these things, but we will also know that it is not what we expected or thought we hoped for, that it has not come by the usual means, but that God has stepped in and done what we always thought “man” had to do. And that will leave us amazed, and giving glory to God.

This Christmas, then, and always, let us be found looking not at ourselves and our confused and half-understood desires but, with Mary, desiring what God promises and is working to bring about in our lives even now.

Amen.

³ Lucy Shaw, *Mary's Song*.