

25 December 2010

Christmas Proper 1

Sermon notes:

Luke 2.1-14

Rev Dr Craig Thompson

One of the striking things about the way in which Luke begins his account of the ministry of Jesus is his interest in the historical detail. At the very beginning of his gospel he tells the reader that he is seeking to present an "orderly account" of what has happened. In our reading this morning, we see some of that order as Luke sets the historical context for the birth of Jesus. Augustus is emperor; Quirinius is governor of Syria. A census is called, and a certain family has to do what many others also had to do – move from one town to another in order to be counted, in this case from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Because the story is so familiar to us, and is linked to such extraordinary claims, we're likely to miss the very ordinariness of it all. There is nothing particularly special about these figures, their place or their time. The only extraordinary thing, really, is that *any* place or any time should feature so prominently in the story of a god – but I'll come back to that later.

For the moment, it is the ordinariness which I want to emphasise. Mary or Joseph may have had some idea about what was going to happen, but not so any one else caught up in the business of the day. The setting, then, is no different from today: it might have been "...In those days when Julia was Prime Minister, and Ted was Premier;" or "...when Kevin was Prime Minister and John was Premier", or "...when John was Prime Minister and Steve was premier..." – take your pick, for each is as ordinary in their own way as Augustus and Quirinius, and workers in factories or office blocks or at the check-out are as ordinary as shepherds in the fields. Luke tells us that it is this simple ordinariness which fractures for a short while to let in the light of heaven.

Those of you familiar with the Internet will almost certainly know of the service YouTube. YouTube is a website to which it's possible to send videos of anything you like for other people to view. A recent video clip which has attracted over 26 million views in the last few weeks covers a miracle in a shopping centre food court at lunchtime.¹ The food court is as food courts always are – filled with people eating or passing

through on their way somewhere else, everyone pretty much minding their own business. In the background you can just hear a piano finishing up a version of Jingle Bells, and then moving to the opening notes of another Christmas favourite – not that anyone pays any attention to such things in those places. Suddenly a woman in a corner of the eating area stands and picks up the tune being played: Hallelujah! This makes people jump! But then the focus swings across the mall as some one else answers with the next line from the chorus: Hallelujah! And then several more lunch-munchers stand up and continue: [...for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth! Hallelujah!]

And so it goes. I've now run out of choristers, but by the end of that miracle in the food court 50 or 60 choristers who had planted themselves as shoppers stand up to deliver a marvellous rendition of the great chorus – and all the more marvellous because no one expected it, or even asked or hoped for it, and yet it came. The impact of the event is not simply the surprise, for the bombs of terrorists also take us by surprise. It is that the surprise is something so *beautiful* – so uplifting, so liberating from the dreariness of a food court lunch in the bland, everyday-everywhere ordinariness of a shopping centre.

I spoke a moment ago of the food mall stunt as a "miracle". "Miracle" is a word the roots of which can be traced back to the foundational languages from which our modern European languages stem. It originally had two meanings, one of which is quite familiar to us and the other less so, but which we would do well to rehabilitate.

The familiar meaning of the verbal form was simply "to be astonished". A miracle is, or was, an astounding thing. But, as we've already noted, astonishment is sometimes a matter of horror and scarcely what we'd want to call miraculous.

But the second meaning of the old word clarifies the astonishment, and might perhaps stretch our imagination on the theme: "to miracle" was "to smile". In a day when talk about miracles gets tied up in dreary debates about the laws of nature and whether or not God is "interventionist", we have done well if we learn that the significance of a miracle is not how it could have happened, but the *effect* it had, or *would have* if it did occur. The original focus of "miracle" was the one who *experienced* the extra-ordinary thing, not the event itself; the miracle is the astonishment, and then the smile which follows. In our gospel reading this morning this shifts the sense of miracle from the birth of Jesus himself to the joyful praise of the angels addressing the shepherds and that of the shepherds themselves as they returned from seeing the Christ-child.

¹ Search "Christmas Food Court Flash Mob" on youtube.com to see the video.

I remarked at the beginning that the truly extraordinary thing in the story of the birth of Jesus is not the situation or the characters *per se*, but that *any* place or any time should feature so prominently in the story of a god. For we prefer our gods to be mobile, portable, relocatable, capable of being everywhere in general, with the result that they are never really anywhere in particular. To put it differently, we prefer our gods to be *faceless* – without the identifying marks or features which arise from a special relationship to a particular time and place. Gods are more convenient when they don't have histories, less demanding, less offensive even if in fact this also makes them much less effective.

Yet Luke's historical detail runs counter to this; while it is an *ordinary* time, it is *a* time, nevertheless *that* time and place, and not another. Part of what is ordinary about us is that we each have our own time and place, but this is also the case for God. God "happens", God "events", breaks in, in this *particular* slice of the ordinary, and in this way shows just how close he can come into our very human situation – all the way.

The really extraordinary thing about the food court miracle is not the event itself but the chorus which is sung there. For that extraordinary music, with the whole oratorio of which it is a part, arises from the conviction that what *is* ordinary – an emperor, a census, a stable, a baby, shepherds going about their business – or a shopping centre – can become *God-bearing*. It is the surprising presence of the beautiful which causes what is such a moving response from those unsuspecting shoppers in the food court. It is the gospel that that which encompasses all-things – God the beginning and end of the world – has taken shape in *one* thing – in one time, one place. And it's enough that it has occurred *there*, for this makes even our time and place a situation for such surprise.

And so it is that the ordinariness of dabs of paint on a canvas, or an act of compassion, or the architectural lines of a building, or human voices, catgut and brass, may now become threads which can be woven into a fabric which is simply miraculous in the ancient sense – causing us to smile, lifting us out of the ordinary into something very different.

What the world in all its around-and-around ordinariness *needs* is the miraculous – that which will cause us to smile, breaking us out of what is familiar and hum-drum even if only for a moment, giving us a glimpse of the nearness of the things of heaven and so cause to smile, and give praise to God.

For this all God's people pray, even as for the presence of God in the child in the manger, tucked away in an odd little corner of the world, for the joy which broke forth here and there in response, and for the promise that the miracle of saving, liberating joy is still held in store for us even now, we give all thanks be God, now and always. Amen.