

First Eucharist of Christmas
Isaiah 9.2-7/Psalm 96/Titus 2.11-14/John 1.1-14
St. Paul's Church, Halifax
24-25 December 2007

Why a Child?

~Paul H. Friesen~

Tonight, finally, it's Christmas Eve. Finally, the noise of the city has let up. There is some noise in the streets, of course, some tipsy bar patrons calling out to each other. You might hear the taxis, too, and closer to the water the sounds of the harbour. And there will be sad sounds, perhaps even women calling out for customers and men grunting in reply. And there will probably be harsher sounds here and there—breaking glass, angry shouts, a pistol being shot. This is the centre of the city; there almost always is noise. We are broken, and we live in a broken world.

And yet the noise has been letting up. The cash registers have fallen dumb. This night belongs to the Christian faith—it always will. It is the night, the great Evangelist John said, when 'the word became flesh and dwelt among us.' Jesus was born. God became incarnate as one of us. Our creator lived among us as a creature. And it all started on this night.

The only noise meant to be heard tonight is the sound of a child crying out, the infant Jesus. Because babies cry out in the night; it is their sign to us of their presence, whether we want to hear it or not. So if it really was Martin Luther who said about Jesus that 'away in a manger...no crying he makes' we know Luther was wrong about one small point.

And as if to remind us of the infant's cry, our church bells will peal out at midnight to say the only thing that can be said—'Christ is born!' And we will hear this if we are thinking, at all, about what tonight means.

It is the night, when '[Christ] united angels and men [in]to one family through his incarnation.' So it was put in a thousand-year old 'Anglo-Saxon Homily on Christmas.'¹ Angels and men, and women and children, and enemies and friends re-united in one family—all because Christ was born.

It is the night, said St. John Chrysostom five hundred years earlier, the night 'when our [language] fails...[when] we speak [but] do not understand... and some things there are that we may not even speak.'²

¹ It was likely preached by Aelfric, Abbot of Cerne in Dorset: *A Lectionary of Christian Prose*, ed. A.C. Bouquet (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1939), p.24.

² In the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (X): Hebrews*, ed. Erik Heen and Philip Krey (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), p.13

And what has left us almost speechless?

The prophet Isaiah spoke the words that have been claimed from the beginning by Christians: 'For unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given.' If this doesn't leave us speechless—well, then, it ought to.

This ought to leave us speechless for the same reason that great Gospel text, *John* 3.16, should leave us speechless: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son...' Why a son—why a child—in our moment of dark need?

And we know the darkness is upon us, though not the darkness of night alone. Every second, every minute, every hour—a child starves to death, a mother dies in child birth, a civilian is shot in the theatre of war, a refugee has his face crushed into the earth.

So why a son—why a child? Is this the best that God can do? Yes, it seems it is. In our Gospel, John said: 'To all who receive [this child], who believed in his name, [God] gave power to become children of God.' God sent his child so that we could become his children too.

But we know the rules, don't we? We know that if we want to solve a crisis in a far off land, we don't send children. We send the great. We send former Presidents and Prime Ministers.

We send men like Jimmy Carter and Tony Blair to solve problems in the Middle East—or powerful women, politicians like Condoleezza Rice.

But God sent a child to the Middle East, so long ago. And like the world of yesterday, mighty armies now fill its streets—once they were Roman, once they were sent by Islamic Sultans. Once they called themselves Christian Crusaders; and later British armies and then Israeli troops came too.

But God—God sent a child; 'a child has been born for us.' Why?

Is it the innocence of children? No, not quite—children learn from us to put up their guard, to watch out for their own interests, to know that the best defence is a good offence. And they learn it early on. There is even such a sad thing as a child soldier.

So why a child? Why does the *Gospel According to St. Luke* tell us: 'And [Jesus] went down with [Mary and Joseph] to Nazareth and was subject unto them...and [he] increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.'³ Why not skip that bit, and present Jesus fully-grown, a powerful heavenly being descending with sword flashing, make right out of wrong, which ever way he turned? An action film-hero—a Bruce Willis or a Harrison Ford—would have been much more satisfying, and more believable too.

³ *Luke* 2.51-52, *King James Version*.

But this was not God's way. It's not what we recall this night. We give thanks for a child, the Messiah in the cradle. What could be more helpless than a newborn child in the arms of peasants in a ancient land under military occupation? And yet what a better night to baptize three children in this place, than this night!

God sent his child, St. John said, to 'give [us] power to become children of God.'

What is the power of a child? What was the power of the only begotten son of God? Only this, that God poured (and that God pours) his grace into the one who will grow, who will learn, who won't count the cost of starting over, but embrace every chance to be born again.

The author of the biblical *Letter to the Hebrews* 'bit the bullet'. When it came to Jesus—and it always comes to Jesus—he said: 'In the days of his flesh...though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; And being made perfect, [Jesus] became the author of eternal salvation.'⁴

But do we not confess Jesus as Lord?—'God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God'. Oh yes, we do, especially tonight!

But here's the thing: if God had to become a child to save the whole world, so do we to bring any hope, any change to our little worlds. 'To all who received [Jesus], who believed in his name, [God] gave power to become children of God.' If God had to become a child, then so do we. There can be no other way.

Tonight God would have us be children again. God invites us to abandon our foolish wisdom, our convictions that things have to be the way they are. God calls out to us. We have nothing to lose.

The war can end. I can be forgiven. My marriage might not be over. I can recover the first joy of my vocation. I know my children won't hate me forever. There is eternal life beyond the few years of our frail flesh. God became a child, that we might become children of God—that we might change, might grow.

Tonight we will baptize children: Gail, and Genevieve and Linnea—'for three children have been born for us, three children given to us.' They will lead us to the place that Christ himself will take us—if we let them. 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son.' Glory lies ahead, our return to the image of God in which God created us—as God's children.

Tonight we are invited by none less than God to look on his child, Jesus, who was born, who lived, who suffered, who died, who arose, and ascended—and

⁴ *Hebrews 5.7-9 (King James Version).*

was glorified. That is the path set out for us. It is the only path that holds out hope for this world.

Jesus said: 'Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter in.'⁵

A child knows she can change, can repent, can be born again.

Thanks be to God for this holy night, for the birth of Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God that through a little child, he leads us.

Thanks be to God for Gail, and Genevieve, and Linnea.

Jesus Christ is born tonight. Alleluia!

Jesus Christ be born in us this night, we pray. Amen!

⁵ *Luke 18.17 (King James Version).*