

Isolation Radio Talk

Manger and Cross belong together

Good Morning

When I was a schoolboy in South London my headmaster would not allow carols to be sung in school before Christmas; as small children we thought it strange. This year, to be sure, we shall sing carols, how could we not? And even if we cannot come together in the way we should like - it will not be quite the same - we shall smile; we shall sing; we shall rejoice. But I must admit, Mr Start, my headmaster, was right. I ask you, I ask myself; what family holds parties to celebrate a birth in the family *before* the baby is born?

This year is different; since March, our mood has a lot in common with those last days of waiting for a birth; anxiety, uncertainty, preparation, hoping all will be well. That is a mood I have tried to communicate to you these four Sunday's before Christmas, in this season called Advent. I have tried also to paint a picture of great, almost impenetrable darkness and then, then, a simple, single light coming towards you until that moment when light floods the world around you.

We are not quite there yet; I make no apology for staying on what you might call the dark side of Christmas. Here is mystery. The birth of the Christ Child, if you go gently and think deeply, will touch deep streams in you about life and death and what lies beyond it. Manger and Cross belong together though you will not thank me for reminding you of it at the feast. I stay close to the ancient themes in what I say to you now; I want to talk about 'A life to come'; I ask it as a question. A life to come?

Inevitably I must move from personal encounter into the tradition of the Church and the teaching of Scripture. Certainly how you come towards your own death; how you might be given strength to stay beside someone who is about to die, will be dictated to, and illuminated, by any understanding you may have of what will happen when you die.

Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist, taught that to believe in immortality was a healing experience; for no one can live in peace, 'in a house that is shortly to tumble about [your] ears'. Yet that is precisely the possibility with which we live in an age of un-faith, or, more accurately, an age of so many faiths, so many gods; so many idols; our willingness to believe rubbish is only matched by our unwillingness to hold to the truths of our unbelievably rich inheritance.

Nonetheless, it is surely contrary to all that Christians believe about a loving God, to terrify, coerce, lie too, and threaten people into believing in God or God's kingdom. The Letters you find in the Christian Scripture (some of you know it as The New Testament) are full of expectation that Christ would return soon and certainly before the disciples died; you can see how that might be after the events of the first Easter. When this does not happen, questions begin to be asked. Today it seems unreasonable to us to live with the immediate expectation of the end of all things; in any

case there have been so many ludicrous attempts at such predictions. Remember, Jesus said, 'it is not for you to know the season or the hour'.

Jesus also spoke a great deal about the Kingdom of God but very little about immortality. His one argument was in an answer to a Jewish sect called the Sadducees; Jesus said, 'God is not the God of the dead but of the living,' for *all* live in God (Mark 12.27). It is quite important to get hold of that. Belief in God is first, immortality comes second. 'Because I live', Jesus said, '*you* shall live too' (John 14.19).

Is that really so? Jesus spoke of the Kingdom almost entirely in terms of this world; that is a clear indication how we too should view it. Christians try, and sometimes fail miserably, it is true, to say they are a 'Kingdom people, with Kingdom values, a Kingdom story to tell.' Jesus said his kingdom is like the woman who lost a coin; like a man who had two sons; like yeast; like a mustard seed. Do you see? You have a window into the next world by reference to this one.

At the same time Jesus shows that the kingdom of the world to come *is* different, in quality and in its ordering. So beware of anyone who tells you they know what life is like beyond the grave; certainly, they do not. If you are locked into ancient inherited pictures you will also ignore St Paul's teaching, 'flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable' (1 Cor 15.50).

Without doubt, seeking imagined safety, there is an upsurge of traditionalist religion; it will threaten a return to unwelcome fears and hatreds alongside perhaps, benefits. There needs to be a proper *awe* and *fear* of God; that is something I have tried to say this Advent. You must recognise that there are dangers if you become self-centred; if you live without faith; without hope. I think all of you know how present those temptations are in our public and private lives; and they are temptations. The paralysing fear of punishment that dogged some earlier Christian generations has no place in the Christian gospel.

These coming days will return most of us to childhood images and memories. Advent will soon be over; darkness will be vanquished. So let Christmas be Christmas; full of light and hope; rejoicing; singing; giving.

Still, do not let them be for you days of forgetfulness. Let them be days for taking *up* the vision, for seeing the whole world, its pains and pleasures, its tragedies and wonders, its mess, muddle and confusion but, as well, its deep, deep longing; days when you rejoice that light has come again into the world; how? In the ordinariness of a human birth, and the helplessness of a dependent child.

My prayer for you is that you will see the world as the place where God's grace and glory and truth can be found. Days in which the Word made flesh, will become real to you and to all.

Thank you for listening

Prayer

Let us pray to God, the one single light, burning in the darkness,

We pray for those caught up in wars around the world;
soldiers, refugees and those who hold fast
to the reasons for the fighting...

We pray for homeless folk
- excluded from what the rest of us are doing,
cold, struggling to keep a hold of who they are...

We pray for folk who are ill,
coping with pain, fearing the worst,
and for those in the NHS who worry for the future...

We pray for those folk struggling in relationships,
especially at this 'family time',
when the cracks are just below the surface...

And for the deepest hopes of our hearts, we pray now...

Silence is kept

Into the mess of this world a fragile child will come -
yelling in the night for his mother,
needing milk and clean linen...

We pin our hopes on you, little baby,
our God
- pushed out into the world
through pain and into poverty.

Our God is with us and our hope is re-born.
Amen.

['Pinning our hopes on Jesus', from Cloth for the Cradle, Wild Goose Worship Group; p54-55]