

Pro-Cathedral / Donnybrook

4/5 December 2021

Welcome

Thirteen years after the end of WWII, in the second year of the EEC, when De Valera was Taoiseach and Robert Briscoe was mayor of Dublin, and when Pius XII was pope in Rome and John Charles McQuaid was Archbishop of Dublin, a small boy, in Youghal (Co Cork), made his first Holy Communion. You might think (rightly!) that I'm losing the run of myself dating my first Holy Communion like that. It is, however, not too different from the way Luke dates the appearance of John the Baptist and Jesus.

Topic

With this important-sounding dating of John the Baptist, what is Luke up to?

Steps

First of all he is saying that something of world significance happened in that year in a backwater of the Empire, unbeknownst to the powers of the day, both civil and religious. Because of what happened over the next three years, we are here today. Later, in the Acts of the Apostles, Paul is defending himself in front of King Agrippa and Queen Bernice in Caesarea Maritima, and he says,

Indeed the king knows about these things, and to him I speak freely; for I am certain that none of these things has escaped his notice, for this was not done in a corner. (Acts 26:26 NRSV)

Truth be told, *it kind of was done in a corner*. Nazareth is not mentioned once in the Old Testament. Jesus was a carpenter, in Greek a *tektōn*, meaning a builder's labourer. Who this Jesus became, what he said and did, and his final destiny changed the face of world history. While affirming universality, Luke was underlining the impressively modest origins of our faith. The beginnings were really on the edge.

Malcolm Guite is a Church of English priest, poet and troubadour. One of his sonnets is called precisely *Christmas on the edge*. He goes a bit further than Luke, as you shall hear:

Christmas sets the centre on the edge;
The edge of town, the outhouse of the inn,
The fringe of empire, far from privilege
And power, on the edge and outer spin
Of turning worlds, a margin of small stars
That edge a galaxy itself light years
From some unguessed at cosmic origin.
Christmas sets the centre at the edge.
And from this day our world is re-aligned
A tiny seed unfolding in the womb

Becomes the source from which we all unfold
And flower into being. We are healed,
The end begins, the tomb becomes a womb,
For now in him all things are re-aligned.

The invitation of Advent is to recognise two things about ourselves. We are all on the edge, the periphery. Life is a bit more slippery and contingent than it seemed. We feel fragile, we are puny, and we wonder how to make sense of it all.

At the same time, we are caught up in the most wonderful adventure. Yes, the word of God came to John in the wilderness; yes, God has spoken. In the words of the letter to the Hebrews:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:1-3a)

How can this extraordinary claim speak to us today? In the Christian frame, the key is always the same. We believe God is love. We believe God has disclosed his love in the ministry and preaching, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. We believe "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." (Romans 5:5) As it says in the wedding Mass, love is our origin, love is our constant calling, love is our fulfilment in heaven. We are caught up in love of the God we cannot see. We believe this is what we were made for and we really know this in our heart of hearts. In the common phrase, this *really is* what it is all about.

Conclusion

The God of cosmos made himself known in a single, fragile human life that all every one of us, in our fragility and potential, in our modesty and magnificence, might know that this God loves each one of us with the same extraordinary intensity. At least that is what has kept the little boy who made his first holy communion going until now!