

Donnybrook

1 January 2022

Welcome

Eight days ago, we marked the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. Because of restrictions, Christmas was different again this year but I hope was enjoyable nevertheless. In the carols and in the readings, we listened again to the stories which surround the birth of Jesus and there is more to come on the 6th of January. The stories are highly pictorial and very appealing.

Topic

As you will have noticed, the readings today are different, poetic and more philosophical. These extraordinary readings offer us the opportunity to reflect in tranquillity, on significance of Jesus' birth. And not only his birth, but also his life, ministry, teaching, death and resurrection.

Steps

Where to start? Nearly every faith – traditional or philosophical – wants to affirm two opposing realities: the beyond of God, always greater than our minds, and the nearness of God, nearer to us than we are to ourselves. Some religions, such as Buddhism, strongly affirm the negative way, "not this, not that." This is also found in Christian mysticism.

Ancient Judaism provides a good illustration of the tension. They wanted to affirm the beyond of God. You can see this in a classic text such as

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your
ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)

At the same time,

And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people.
(Leviticus 26:12)

In a late evolution of their faith, ancient Israelites came up with a brilliant way of holding these two distinct realities together. They use the image of divine wisdom and using that image they were able to say something of God's wisdom or mind is found in all that is, in the pattern or logic of creation. In the same way, composer or a painter leave part of him or her self in the work. The word for wisdom in both Hebrew and Greek is feminine. That God's mind is feminine is no surprise to women, of course. Using this image, they were able to make extraordinary affirmations. In another part of Sirach, the poet is reflecting on the beauty of creation. While losing none of the transcendence of God, he writes: *We could say more, but we could never say enough. Let the final word be, "he is the All."* I find that quite electrifying.

In the Christian vision, this holding together of the beyond and the near goes one step further – really one leap further. The writer knows that God is “beyond”: *no one has ever seen God*. He also knows God is near: in the first letter of John, we read *God is love and whoever lives in love lives in God and God lives in them*.

The wisdom, the Word of God became flesh and dwelled among us. It is an extraordinary thing to say of any human being and it is also an extraordinary thing to say of God. Not only is God present in all that is, his fingerprints all over creation, not only is God present in every heart that love, but God also chose to be present to us in a single, fragile human life, to be with us, to speak to us from inside our experience. As the reading says: it is the only Son, who is close to the Father, who has made him known. In fact, the Greek says, who told the story – as we know, it is a love story.

Conclusion

For all their rich complexity, the message of the readings is simple: Yes! As St Paul puts it in the Second Letter to the Corinthians,

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not “Yes and No”; but in him it is always “Yes.” For in him every one of God’s promises is a “Yes.” For this reason it is through him that we say the “Amen,” to the glory of God. (2 Corinthians 1:19-20)

We should not be afraid to hear that yes – a yes to the goodness of creation, a yes to all that is human, a yes, an affirmation, to each one of us today. All this happened so that we might know and love the God we cannot see.