Sermon 19.12.21 Advent 4 SL

In a very ordinary little cul- de- sac of late 1940’s council houses in my previous parish of Hampton Hill, I cycled daily past a scruffy piece of turf with an odd stump at one side. One day, I did get off my bike and explore. I discovered the barrel of a cannon, placed vertically into the earth. The cul de sac was called Roy Grove and only when I looked it up, did I discover that this was the original reference point of all measuring of the Ordnance Survey. General William Roy, amidst fears of invasion form the perfidious French, set about triangulating the distance between the Greenwich and Paris observatories and his work was the very beginning of the accurate scaled mapping of our country. Roy’s baseline chain, the other end of which is just on top of the tunnel you go through into Heathrow Airport, was amazingly accurate, according to current satellite techniques, to within three inches over five miles.

And what we have in today’s readings is another long chain stretching throughout the Old Testament, a chain of myriad people, events, responses, challenges, spanning hundreds of years in which the promise of God moves inexorably to its fulfilment in the birth and life, the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

From the distant origins in creation and the fall, with all their poetic imagery describing with observational accuracy goodness yet loss, plenty yet struggle, fecundity but hard labour, through the stories of childless Abraham and Sarah, with the fear of God’s purposes coming to naught, yet rescued by the promise of angels, through the exodus years and the occupation of the promised land, through the judges and kings, good and bad, through the whipping call of the prophets for the people to turn back to God, through the exile in Babylon to the restoration of Israel, right up to John the Baptist, this long chain of events, however many times it is snapped or snookered by greed, power, incompetence or deliberate sin, nevertheless, God keeps on laying down the next link. Step by step, link by link, the chain is laid, just like those measuring chains of Roy and his 18thC engineers, to reveal how all things are related.

Luke, I think, tries, through his birth narratives to show us exactly this- that the fulfilment of all God’s promise, involved all these previous links- known and unknown events in which, like Mary and Elizabeth, people have said yes to God and so repaired again and again, the broken links. Luke is assuring his hearers that God is not to be thwarted- neither changing his plan nor his methods.

And in the ‘yes’ which unlikely Elizabeth and unlikely Mary utter, that plan is taken to its fulfilment. Mary, visiting Elizabeth, causes the unborn John to leap in her kinswoman’s womb- kindred spirits indeed, willing to say yes to God in the chain of events that is their own life, thereby bringing that promise of God to fruition.

And if we learn anything from these women furthering the coming of the kingdom, we surely learn that God includes all in his invitation to participate, to become a link in the chain. Women, men and children giving of their skill, their talents, their resources, their energy, their professionalism, for profit- but not for their own gain, but for profiting God’s creation. It strikes me again and again when I see the work of Christian Aid partners running clinics in refugee camps in Gaza or Bangladesh, initiating water pumps in drought ridden East Africa, re-creating small peacebuilding opportunities in Afghanistan, or standing up to military dictatorship in Myanmar; when I see the energy of volunteers at Glass Door’s nightshelters or our foodbank here at St Luke’s, that the chain which comes to fruition in Jesus of Nazareth is not complete in him, but fulfilled in him. There is a difference. Completion only comes when we move from being spectators to participants, when we join in the laying of the chains of love through self giving, self sacrifice, self engagement. Because once we glimpse the purposes of God we too shall leap like the child John in Elizabeth’s womb- a leap of faith yes, which is about living differently, critically to this world, in but not of this world, a treading lightly to this world’s norms and an openness to both the heights and depths of love which Mary knew. Only then can we sing with her ‘ My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord’ when we are part of that filling of the hungry, raising of the lowly, strengthening of the weak.

I think I began to understood that from a parishioner who lived in that same Roy Grove, in a council flat near that up-ended cannon in my last parish. She suffered psychotic illness all her adult life, was regularly hospitalised for long periods in locked wards, often to be found next to naked on the street, or rescued from far-flung railwaystations and yet a woman who knew profound generosity in her heart. Christmas, birthdays, Easter, patronal festival or for no particular reason she’d come to the Vicarage or to church and bring presents- chocolates (with her favourite ones already eaten), bath lotion (half used), a pair of gloves she’d ask to have returned when it turned cold. And yet she in all her vulnerabilities understood and represented that generous ‘yes’ to God, in her delight of sharing whatever she had, inviting others to know the loving purposes of God. For she lived in boundless hope and in endless generosity, with no sense of profit for self, but gain for the recipient whom she invited into the delight of the gift and the very act of generosity. Of her too, I could sing ‘Her soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord’.

But what of mine and yours? Will we join with Mary’s yes? Will we be links in that chain fulfiling the loving purposes of God? Will we?

BL

15.12.21