Sermon 05.12.21 Advent2 SL

Somewhere in a shoe box, probably in my sister’s attic, is- among many other Kodak holiday snaps, a photo of me, aged 11 or thereabouts, straddling the border between Germany and Austria- with a foot either side. The line down the middle of the quiet, country road is painted alternately black, red and yellow, and red and white- for the two countries flags. I still recall it as a strange phenomenon for a Brit, used to our island home, of two countries having an open land border. No guards, no fences. More recent images of land borders, say USA and Mexico or Poland and Belarus suggest segregation with the starkest delineation of territory.

But,today’s Gospel suggests, I think, the former rather than the latter. John the Baptist stands in that long line of prophets in the scriptures and he straddles the worlds of before and after the coming of Christ. Mary too, of course also inhabits both sides of the Jesus fulcrum, this turning point in God’s purposes.

But the Gospel begins with something very specific, in a sense, rather like that line down the middle of the road, the specific spot of the border. For the Gospel opens with this extraordinarily specific piece of historical context. It locates exactly, the time and place for this turning point in history. Luke notes the particular- the 15th year of the emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod ruler of Galilee and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Iturea and Trachonitis, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of the Lord came to John – in the wilderness. There’s nothing vague, shoebox in the attic about this. Luke is saying, in real time, John spoke the word of the Lord, in preparation for the coming of the Christ- that’s what the whole line of OT prophecy had been pointing its hearers towards and John, in specific place and time is the final voice crying in the wilderness. Like many of the prophets before him, John is on the edge, camel’s hair, locusts, wild honey and all that, in the unpredictable wilderness, not the secure city. And he straddles the old covenant and the new in being the last in this line of prophets- embodying both promise and fulfilment, what God has already achieved and what is still to come, the now and the not yet.

And that of course is exactly the point of these four weeks of Advent waiting and watching, to give time and space to both prophecy and fulfilment. This is the time to hold in our minds not only the babe of Bethlehem but also the crucified and risen Christ. For our own limited understanding we have falsely separated out the birth of Christ form his death and resurrection. Yet, we can’t have had the latter without the former, and the former, God’s solidarity with human kind, necessarily leads to the latter. For the Word becoming flesh at Christmas is, of course, the beginning also of his passion. The orthodox tradition makes this clear when it names Christmas the ‘Winter Pasch’- winter’s Easter. We can’t separate Christmas from Easter in the end, they hang together- for they each speak of hope, of new-birth, of fulfilment, of redemption- of ‘a Saviour who is Christ the Lord’.

And John- in the wilderness, this crackpot of a man, in our eyes, to whom does he point, but to another nobody- the son of a teenager from out in the sticks, this refugee, this man who has nowhere to call home, no job, no cv to impress. For that, of course, is the very point of Luke listing the great and the good so meticulously. Yes, it’s these emperors, governors, kings and rulers, these high priests, who the world regards as being in charge- and yet they come to naught. The homeless babe at Bethlehem, the wandering miracle worker and preacher, the tortured, naked crucified one, it is he who crosses all the boundaries, who straddles humanity and divinity, he who is both promise and fulfilment.

And that promise and fulfilment, the Advent hope, is in real time- now, here, in your life and mine, in the life of the homeless and the luxury apartment dwellers in our parish, the business tycoon and the foodbank guests in our community, the exhausted migrant risking the English Channel as well as the politically powerful in Whitehall. For just as John the Baptist straddles the old and new covenants, so must we, so can we, when we dare to hold on to Christ, in his birth and death and resurrection, for John is the messenger, Christ is the message.

Alan Bennet in his play ‘The History Boys’ rather bluntly says, ‘History is just one f’ing thing after another’. But Luke would disagree, for Luke’s gospel points to a way of being where every obstacle is cleared, overcome, levelled, the crooked made straight and the rough ways plain. Luke says throughout his Gospel that the eternal is rooted in, but never bounded by history. The road Luke looks down is the way of God, a way Christ makes straight, makes accessible, makes level, so that ‘all flesh shall see the salvation of God’. Grounded in the universal embrace of God it is right here in the world’s history that our salvation is won. Christ, invites us, this Advent, to step out in light, in love, in hope; with him, to stand with one foot in the world and one in eternity, watching and waiting, awake at all times, for the day is at hand.

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