

CHRISTMAS AND MATURITY

Text: I Corinthians 14:20 "Do not be children in your thinking, my friends; be infants in evil, but in your thinking be grown-up" (REB) OR "be adults" (NIV) OR "be mature" (RSV)

Christmas for many of us is a time for young people, a time when we indulge our children and gaze sentimentally at Baby Jesus. A time when we perhaps hark back to the rosy security and innocence of the childhood I hope most of us enjoyed - before the gritty reality of this wonderful but sinful and suffering world confronted us.

And there's something *right* in all this. Part of the meaning of Christmas *does* lie in the freshness and innocence surrounding the birth of a baby. The birth of *any* baby, but the birth of this baby, Jesus, in particular. The springs of creation seem to be revealed once again. Perhaps this aspect of Christmas is best summed up for me by the pure notes of the boy soprano as he sings the first verse of that carol "Once in royal David's city". No matter that for the rest of the year he's probably a disobedient, grubby and destructive little monster. For the moment he's an angel, singing with the angels of God, recreating our world in purity and hope.

However, to choose to *stop there* is to misunderstand the birth of Jesus. His birth leads on to his life and ministry and death and resurrection. These are all of a piece, the revelation of what God is like when he empties himself in the flesh of a human being, and lives out a life of sacrificial love in a sinful world. The birth of Jesus is the beginning of the atonement, the 'at-one-ment' which brings us back into loving union with God.

Now when the New Testament writers speak of the "beginning", they don't mean Bethlehem, they mean Pentecost. They mean the outpouring of the Holy Spirit of Jesus on the disciples waiting at Jerusalem 30 or so years later, after the Risen Jesus has appeared to them and ascended to the Father. The Holy Spirit comes upon His Body the Church, on the first disciples. And also on us, and we all begin *our* journey to the Father, a journey which is only possible because Jesus has led the way.

The birth of Jesus is incomplete without His life and ministry and crucifixion and resurrection. It sounds so obvious. Yet how many of us will be in church in Good Friday and Easter Sunday next year? How many of us *know* in our inner being that the Jesus whose birth we celebrate died for *us* on the Cross and rose again for us? How many of us *know* in our inner being that we celebrate the birth of the *Saviour*?

Jesus was born not in some innocent make-believe never-never land, but into the full reality of this wonderful but sinful and suffering world, a world needing a saviour. T.S.Eliot captures this superbly in his poem "Journey of the Magi". One of the Wise Men speaks:

*"...we continued
And arrived at evening, not a moment too soon*

*Finding the place; it was (you may say) satisfactory.
All this was a long time ago, I remember
And I would do it again, but set down
This: were we led all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death."*

These are luminous words. T.S.Eliot is no child in his thinking. He is mature.

When the Wise Men returned home they were not at ease. But then neither was the new baby they had journeyed to see. *There was no childhood of innocence and security for Jesus.* Soon after His birth He had to flee for His life, carried off by Joseph and Mary to escape the malice of Herod. He was born in a stable, and raised in a peasant village in a conquered province, subject to arbitrary rule and economic exploitation. He grew to maturity amidst a people fanned to fever heat by their own suffering and by hopes of successful rebellion. We have no right to suppose that Joseph and Mary were able to throw some sort of magic screen around Jesus to protect him. This is not what "incarnation" means. The Word, the Son of God, became flesh in this world *as it is*.

Jesus was not at ease in this world as it is; He was not at ease until He rested in the tomb, and rose again, bringing peace to His disciples. If we sense peace surrounding the crib (tonight), it's not the peace of innocence and secure childhood. It's the peace of heaven, the peace of eternity breaking through into this world, a foretaste of the peace which follows *after* Jesus has fought and won His conflict. That's why it's so fleeting, so tantalising, so heart-breaking. It's the voice of our heavenly Father calling to us here in the 'far country', calling us home. Not calling us back into our own childhood, but calling us on to maturity, calling us to follow Jesus, to walk the way Jesus walked, taking up our cross and following Him into suffering and death and resurrection peace.

For the Star of Bethlehem marks the beginning of the Way of the Cross. If you want to get to heaven, start here. And the peace and the joy of Bethlehem are guarantees that this is the right route, that Jesus is indeed the Way, the Truth, and the Life. *"My brothers and sisters, do not be children in your thinking; be infants in evil, but in your thinking be adults, be mature"* And may yours be a truly blessed and holy Christmas.

*A sermon preached in the Anglican Parish of Eastbourne on Christmas Eve 2019 by
the Revd Canon Peter Stuart*