

A FRUIT OF PREACHING

The Revd. Pamela D Strachan

It's always gratifying when someone has actually listened to our sermons sufficiently to follow up with a query or a suggestion. And so it was last Christmas. Our Advent study group had been reading Tom Wright's 'God and the Pandemic'. When I came to preparing a Christmas address, I referenced both Wright and Richard Rohr, whose daily meditations from the 'Centre for Action and Contemplation' I have followed for some years.

Perhaps it was the Advent candles last year that prompted my childhood memory of singing: 'Jesus bids us shine with a clear pure light...' but my reflection last Christmas explored the idea of what was actually meant by those somewhat sentimental words of a hymn which appeared in CH3 but was dropped in CH4.

That hymn had always conjured up for me children's nativity plays and innocent youngsters standing with their candles looking angelic in their white robes. But last year my head was full of Tom Wright ('God and the Pandemic' as our Advent study book) and coupled with that was the Advent theme from Richard Rohr's daily meditations - which was the idea of 'giving birth to Christ'. Not just leaving that task to Mary as she gave birth to Jesus, but to respond to the invitation that the incarnation in fact invites us 'to give birth to Christ' in our own lives.

So these were some rich themes to explore in the Christmas address which developed from my childhood recollections of singing 'Jesus bids us shine...'.

'The Rohr meditations this Advent have been exploring the idea of 'Giving Birth to Christ' - of Christ being incarnated in the world, God's great gift to humanity. Nothing unusual in that, you might say - that's what we understand by the Incarnation. God came into the world in the form of a vulnerable little baby.

But usually, we assign the role of 'giving birth to Christ' to Mary. It feels safe; it's a wonderful story and she does it for us - on our behalf.

But just as our Christmas is being turned upside down (by the pandemic), maybe Advent has been too - as we take a new perspective on this idea of 'giving birth to Christ' - because the invitation from God is to us too.

WE are being invited to give birth to Christ in the world... we are invited to play our part in the Creation story, in the ongoing incarnation of Christ in the world. And yes, it involves pain and patience - powerlessness and humility... and great trust. Just as any childbirth does.

We are not just passive bystanders at the crib-side in the nativity story, lost in wonder, love and awe - we are active **participants** in the Christmas story - like Mary, we are called by God, invited by God to take part in the greatest 'dance' as Thomas Merton called it. We are invited to join with Christ - yes, **Jesus, the Christ** - as he reveals love's urge towards wholeness **through reconciliation, mercy, peace, and forgiveness.**

In Jesus, God breaks through and points us in a new direction. He bids us to 'shine like the light of a candle' - not caught up in our own little ego struggles, totally preoccupied with our 'false self' and our petty obsessions.

And this is where the Church, perhaps, has done us a disservice - with its traditional emphasis on personal salvation. And I quote Richard Rohr here:

"The common Christian understanding that Jesus came to save us by a cosmic evacuation plan is really very individualistic, petty, and even egocentric. It demands no solidarity with anything except oneself. We whittled the great Good News down into what Jesus could do for us personally and privately, **rather than celebrating God's invitation to participate in God's universal creative work.** Instead of believing that Jesus came to fulfil us separately, how about trusting that we are here to fulfil Christ - in the world?"

Perhaps this is what's meant by 'Jesus bids us shine...'. Less of ego, more of Christ in us and recognising Christ in one another. Like candle flames together - in this great Cosmic dance of God's creation.'

There was something of an irreverent snort from one of the congregation when I suggested that we'd been brought up on the idea that 'Jesus came to save us by a cosmic evacuation plan....' But it turned out to be an expression of

appreciation. The idea was enthusiastically taken up that we continue with our study group after Christmas and explore more of the writings that are referenced in the Richard Rohr daily meditations. The problems with the 'cosmic evacuation plan' have been developed by Brian McLaren who writes:

“The church . . . is God’s agent of transformation and healing for the sake of the world. In missional theology, **the gospel is a transformation plan, not an evacuation plan.** It is focused not on airlifting souls to heaven, but on transforming lives so they can be agents of God’s will being done ‘on earth as in heaven’.”
(<https://brianmclaren.net>)

As a result the Advent study group has continued with McLaren’s ‘Faith after Doubt’ and then Richard Holloway’s ‘Between the Monster and the Saint’, Jonathan Livingston Seagull (Richard Bach) - and a whole year has passed with members suggesting different texts. We have now reached Advent again and agreed on Walter Brueggemann’s ‘Names for the Messiah’.

Membership of the group is loose - some excuse themselves when farming or family obligations compete - but generally those who’ve persisted with the weekly meetings have discovered the pleasure of exploring these themes together in a spirit of enquiry and shared faith. It’s not overly academic; there’s no posturing or ‘one upmanship’ which can sometimes prevail in seminars and in some book groups. Zoom meetings have now become so commonplace that we agree we’ve relaxed into them and have probably cohered as an extended Advent study group because it’s such a flexible and convenient way of meeting and sharing.

It has also come during a time of vacancy in our parishes and perhaps that too has helped focus thoughts on needing to keep our parishes going. There’s a tacit recognition that if we wish our church to stay alive, we all need to play our part.

My own personal route to ordination was through reading and discussion groups (as well as suffering and doubt): from St. John of the Cross and Thomas Merton, to Jung and Clarissa Pinkola Estes - and yes, Richard Holloway’s ‘Between the Monster and the Saint’ so it was amusing to read my earnest annotations in the margins that I had made when I first read this book. ‘Yes, I can subscribe to this!’

While in the background for the past 10 years or so, has been the ‘Centre for Action and Contemplation’ and the writing of Richard Rohr. His meditations are a daily prompt to explore other texts and keep returning to Scripture for sustenance and inspiration. Meanwhile the Covid pandemic moves us into a new phase this week, we embark on another series of Advent reflections as we recognise we are but a small part in the great Divine Dance. It involves pain and patience, powerlessness and humility.... And great trust. And always, hope.

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