



Christmass

2007

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Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 3:4-8a; Matthew 1:18-25

In parts of Mexico there is a nine-night tradition leading up to Christmas Eve, known as the *posada* party. In Spanish, *posada* simply means lodging or shelter. Celebrated each evening, the *posada* party commemorates the cold and difficult journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem in search of shelter. On each of the nights before Christmas a party is held in some home in the neighbourhood. At dusk, everyone assembles outside and a procession begins. Dressed as an angel a small child leads, followed by children in gold and silver costumes carrying figures of Mary and Joseph, adults and musicians bringing up the rear. Everyone sings as they walk, and all carry lighted candles. When they reach the three designated houses for that night, the procession divides in two. One half remains outside and begs for shelter from the other half inside the house. At the first stop, those inside say, 'The inn keeper says: there is no room for you here; just let me go back to bed.' At the second stop, those inside say, 'This is not an inn; I dare not open in case you are a robber.' When they reach the third stop, Mary and Joseph plead once more for a bed, but this time those inside reply: 'Come in holy pilgrims; receive this corner; even though the place is poor I offer it to you from my heart.'

Christmas celebrates the truth that God's proper name is Emmanuel, which means God is with us. Christmas celebrates the truth that God is one of us, the truth that God is within each one of us. Christmas celebrates the reality that God is all around us, rubbing shoulders with us in the street, looking back at us from strangers as well as friends. And the sign of this truth, of this reality, is desperately ordinary, entirely unexceptional: the maiden is with child and will give birth to a son. In other words, we get no blinding sign from heaven. The only indication we have to go on is totally natural, totally earthly, seems totally from this human side of things. There is nothing special about it at all. It happens, as you might say, off-stage rather than centre-stage. And like every other sign it is open to interpretation. Like every other sign it depends on our interpretation, for an uninterpreted sign points nowhere; an uninterpreted sign says nothing. This means the reality of God is fragile indeed, fragile as a beautiful mist which evaporates as soon as the sun comes up, fragile as a newborn baby. It means God's power is unlike any power we know: powerful enough, confident enough, to be vulnerable, to be vulnerable to us. It means God values us, respects us, dignifies us, likes us, loves us. It means God risks all, trusting us to recognise where love is being born and how to hinder or help.

For God, you see, is not located in splendid isolation and security somewhere just beyond the farthest star. God is the next-door neighbour who is just a bit strange, just a bit different to us, who speaks broken English and seems a bit threatening, but longs for our friendship. God is not Raphael's beautiful Madonna and Child, set in aspic, serenely enthroned on our Christmas cards. God is the ragged Madonna and Child in the refugee boat, those desperate so-called 'queue jumpers' turned back by indifferent Australia. God is not above our squabbles and confusions and violence, conveniently untouched and untouchable, immune

from human suffering, immune from human joy. God is trampled underfoot as hard-won civil liberties are blithely whittled away in an age of terror, in our time of fear. God is crucified afresh in all our victims, crucified in every outcast, in every suspect and reject we toss on the scrap-heap.

Yes, we have been given a sign, a sign of who God is and where God is, and this sign contradicts everything we might expect. So the work of interpretation begins, and not just on Christmas Day but every day. For every day Mary and Joseph and the Baby come seeking shelter, and it is up to us to refuse them or recognise them. It is always our choice, yours and mine, to be the first or second or third home at the *posada* party. From all eternity God's name is Emmanuel, from all eternity God is right here with us, yet God is always on the move. Seeking and serving this elusive God is not exactly rocket science, but there is nothing obvious about it: it takes intelligence and sensitivity. Above all, however, it is a journey of the heart. It is a journey *of* the heart *to* the heart.

*I see a twinkle in your eye,
So this shall be my Christmas star
And I will travel to your heart:
The manger where the real things are.*

*And I will find a mother there
Who holds you gently to her breast;
A father to protect your peace,
And by these things you shall be blessed.*

*And you will always be reborn
And I will always see the star
And make the journey to your heart:
The manger where the real things are.*

(Michael Leunig)



The Naming & Circumcision of Christ

Sunday 30th December 2007

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Numbers 6:22-27; Galatians 4:47; Luke 2:15-21

Today's feast of the Naming and Circumcision of Jesus is all about becoming. Not one of us, Jesus included, is made human in an instant, just by being conceived, just by being born.

Jesus becomes truly human, as we all do, only by degrees. 'Stage by stage', says Bishop John Taylor, 'he was initiated as we are; by birth, by circumcision, by presentation with sacrifice, by attendance at the feasts, he was made man – 'made of a woman, made under the law'. He begged for the baptism of repentance, immersing himself into a complete participation in our involvement in one another's sin, and in all the effects of our estrangement from himself.'

Every Jewish baby boy is circumcised on the eighth day, grafted physically into God's enduring covenant with Israel, incorporated before he can know anything about it into his heritage, into his birth-right, into relationship with the source of all life and love. So Jesus too is inducted into the process of becoming truly human in a particular human community, part of a particular faith, a particular world view. We Christians, of course, do the same thing a little differently. We use water and oil and light, and the ceremony is not restricted only to boys. For us, baptism is the beginning of the journey, the first step on the long task of making a particular kind of human being – generous-spirited people like Jesus himself, patient, forgiving, passionate and compassionate, gentle, loving. Our naming of children and our signing them with the cross, sets them on their way to that fullness of life we know to come only through self-giving, only through self-sacrifice.

But none of this happens automatically or magically or casually. Indeed, it may never happen at all. In the end we all must choose for ourselves what has already been done for us. In the end it is all a matter of degrees, a matter of personal intention, of freely chosen discipline – and it depends more than we can ever fathom on who we mix with. It depends more than we can ever know on the company we keep. Principally, of course, becoming Christlike swings on keeping close to the Christ, being part of his living body. This means coming constantly to his bread-body lying on the table as members of his breathing-body standing around the table. And this can be hard work because we have no say in who our sisters and brothers might be. We have to grow up, and growing up means learning to live with those we find awkward and uncongenial as well as those we naturally warm to. It means living in a community where we don't always get our own way, where we compromise to accommodate the needs of others who can be very different to us. It means allowing our rough edges to be knocked off, painful as that is sometimes. It means recognising that we have more to learn from those who irritate us and provoke us than we do from those who never ruffle our feathers.

If you watched the recent TV program on five men spending a month at Worth Abbey, you may have noted that Benedictines take a fourth vow in addition to the usual monastic vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Benedictines promise stability as well. They commit to this monastery, this place, this community. In other words, they can't run away when the going gets tough. They can't run away from each other, they can't run away from God, they can't run away from themselves.

St Benedict and his followers have something vital to teach us here. Maturity for all of us lies in committing to this time, this place, this community of Christ's people. At times, as we all know, this is amusing; it can also be tedious and tiresome; it can even be positively excruciating. But what is achieved by taking our bat and ball and going home? Do we ever learn how to resolve problems that way? What do we ever learn about forgiveness and reconciliation if we keep taking the easy way out? Don't we just take our problems with us, ready to stuff up again somewhere else? Only those who stay the distance know what the scaredy-cats never discover – that making-up is infinitely better than breaking-up.

As the poet says -

Love is born
 With a dark and troubled face,
 When hope is dead
 And in the most unlikely place;
 Love is born,
 Love is always born.

(Michael Leunig)



The Epiphany

Sunday 6th January 2008

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Isaiah 60:1-6; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

As every student of Australian painting knows, our early artists all saw this new country with English eyes. What appeared on their canvasses was not completely accurate, therefore, to what was before them. On the other hand, neither was it completely inaccurate. We can go back to the same places today, and it is immediately obvious that they told the truth but not the whole truth. Somehow, they tidied up the countryside, prettied up the details. They miniaturised the great expanses of it so that it became more manageable. In a word, they made it all more easily digestible to an English sensibility.

Only as time goes on, only after a hundred years and more, do we even begin to get what is actually there without too much interference. And this is not at all because the first artists set out to deceive themselves and us, whereas later artists are inherently more truthful. It is simply because we see what we expect to see. As a writer in *The Weekend Australian* says – “Above all, when we look about us, what we resolve and detect with accuracy is only the central part of the field of vision; the brain, like a constant improviser, is filling in the rest of the detail.”

(The Weekend Australian Review January 5-6, 2008 p. 5)

The headline of Nicolas Rothwell’s article is “Mapping our Imagination” – at least, this is the headline on the article itself. On the cover of the *Review* section of the paper, however, the title is simply “Ways of Seeing.” By looking and looking hard, by looking and looking long, our artists have been learning to see more clearly, and teaching us to see more clearly. And the result is that we do see Australia differently now to the way our parents did. We do see more truly what is really there, and when we travel and experience other landscapes we easily recognise the difference. We easily recognise the difference, and know what it is we are missing. This is one of the reasons those inspired Qantas ads of a few years back worked so magically: because, wherever we are, wherever roam, we still call Australia home. As we fly those last few hours down the west coast to Perth - over the vast expanses of flat red earth; the low, treeless scrub; the brilliant sea and the white beaches - we know where we belong no matter how wonderful the time away has been, and we know this with our hearts as well as our heads. This is an emotional knowing more than an intellectual knowing. It is a spiritual reality which unites us as a people. In a new and welcome and quite unexpected sense, we are all people of the land now, people of the dreaming.

Now this aboriginal dreaming is not so very far removed from the Christian dreaming, for Christian faith is all about looking and learning, it is all about ways of seeing, ways of feeling and knowing. The radiance of the landscape attracts our eyes and hearts, and both Hebrew

and Christian scripture speaks of the divine radiance attracting eyes and hearts. The Greek word for this radiance, of course, is *επιφανεῖα* – epiphany, the shining, the glowing, the dazzling light of God's face. Epiphany, after all, is about looking. Epiphany is about ways of seeing. Matthew trains our eyes by telling the story of the magi, by drawing us into their determination and persistence as they journey, following the star, overwhelmed with joy as they are by its beauty, and by dwelling on their rich symbolic gifts.

We are taught by the desire of the magi to value the Child in the manger. In their eyes he is more splendid than heaven and earth combined - this tiny, wriggling, helpless miracle of new life. They blink before the Child, and the Child blinks back. For, as the contemporary theologian James Alison says, the magi are not the only ones looking. "The Magi have come into the presence of the face, which is the radiance of the Lord. And the face, that of an infant, looks also. When it is not too tired. And when the face is not screwed up with tears. In truth it is learning how to look. The radiance is in the face which is learning to receive the adult clues which will enable it to recognise, remember, identify body parts. It is undergoing the precocious working through of images and sensations which over time will socialize it, make it viable, responsive, subtle. Who could ever have imagined that 'May He make His face to shine upon you' would one day be realised in an infant struggling to focus."

<http://www.jamesalison.co.uk/texts/eng51.html>

God is not at all what we think, our brains like a constant improviser filling in the detail. God is this baby in the manger. Today, Epiphany, we look at the shining, this light, this new and welcome and quite unexpected radiance. Today we are learning to see all over again. Gathering for the last time around the Christmas Crib, we are learning to see afresh, beginning to understand.



The Baptism of the Lord
13th January 2008

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Isaiah 42:1-9; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

In our reading of Matthew's gospel so far we have been listening to words about Jesus spoken by others. Today holds special significance because today Jesus speaks for the first time himself. Today, as we might say, we hear the very first words of the living Word of God. "Then comes Jesus from Galilee to John at the Jordan, to be baptized by him", says Matthew. "John would have prevented him, saying, 'I have need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?' But answering, Jesus said to him, 'Permit it now, for thus it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.'"

These first spoken words of Jesus are obviously important, but they are somewhat odd, somewhat enigmatic. There is a strangeness about them which even the most modern English translations cannot quite escape. "Let it be so for now; for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness" is no great improvement. What on earth does this statement mean? And why on earth does Jesus answer John in the plural? Is this some royal plural, or does "us" mean that what is about to take place is proper for both Jesus and John? Is the reference even wider than the two of them? Anyway, what is this righteousness that they or all of us are to fulfill?

Strangely, we may think, the theology making sense here depends on the geography making sense. Except that this is not strange at all, because Christian theology is never disembodied philosophical musings thrown up by the human mind. Our faith arises around real happenings to real people in real places. This means it is important to notice that John wasn't just using the Jordan as a convenient font, standing mid-stream dunking dozens of customers one after another under the waters.

John was calling for repentance, a turning away from evil and a turning to face God. John was calling for an about face, a fresh start, a new beginning. He wanted fickle human beings to return to our constant, ever-faithful God. So he created a situation where people had to act this out. Dramatically he took the people right out of the promised land, across the Jordan, back into the wilderness, so that they entered all over again into the promised land, ready to begin their walk with God afresh, ready to begin a new life of faithfulness.

John's baptism was all about righteousness, all about rightness replacing wrongness, wholeness swallowing up fragmentation, and this could not be accomplished simply by an interior shift, simply by an invisible change of mind. It involves the whole of who we are, not just the way we think or feel. It demands our mind-heart decisions be played out physically, played out sacramentally, demonstrated as in performing a stage play. Bodies as well as brains are on the line here. Neither is it something individuals can achieve in splendid isolation, but something we as God's people need to do together. Repentant faith is a chorus ending, not a soliloquy, so baptism is necessarily a crowd scene.

That Jesus stands in the crowd on this particular day and submits to this baptism was problematic for the early churches because Jesus as an individual, the Father's only faithful Son, hardly needed any of this. But Jesus is not just acting individually. He is certainly acting individually, and yet more than individually. "It is proper for *us* to fulfill all righteousness." For this particular baptism is above all a demonstration of solidarity, and not just with John the baptizer, not even with all those people crossing the Jordan with him that day, but with all of us down the ages. This is a deliberate act of solidarity with the whole human race, an act of solidarity with all our hopes and achievements, with all our mistakes and false turns and longings for something better. So when the voice from heaven says "this is my Son, the Beloved", God is saying that we all belong to one family, that we all have the potential to live as adult daughters and sons of one Father, sisters and brothers of Jesus the Christ, sisters and brothers to each other.

Just for a moment in these muddy waters, churned up by so many trampling feet, we catch a glimpse of a new Exodus, a glimpse of resurrection really, the sort of fresh start where the world will be put to rights. This baptism of the Lord is a new day, a new creation, a new morning like the first morning. All righteousness can be, will be, fulfilled. Things can be, things will be, all right.



Second Sunday after Epiphany

20th January 2008

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Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

Liturgy books are printed in black and red. The black words are to be said, the red words tell you what to do. The red words of the Roman Sacramentary are quite precise. *The priest genuflects. Taking the host, he raises it slightly over the paten and, facing the people, says aloud:*

*This is the Lamb of God
who takes away the sins of the world.
Happy are those who are called to his supper.*

Here we use a rather older, less literal, more poetic form -

*Behold the Lamb of God
who takes away the sin of the world.
Happy are those who are called to his supper.*

It may seem a bit like splitting hairs, but it is no accident that we say with John the Baptist 'Behold the Lamb of God' rather than 'This is the Lamb of God.' The bread of the Eucharist demands genuflection, it demands kneeling, we humble ourselves before God-with-us in the holy sacrament, but this little piece of bread is not the Lamb of God. At least, not in the sense that I might say 'this is an elephant', or 'this is a blue balloon'. To gaze on this bread, broken and given for us and to us, to look through it or into it, to see it in depth, is to 'behold' the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, something rather different to claiming that the bread itself is the Lamb of God. There is always a tendency in religion to say more than can be said. So it is good for us to be reminded that we need to be genuinely tentative when we express what we believe about God and the world. This is not because we are unsure of ourselves, but because we know we stand before so great a mystery that we can never express in faltering human speech the reality confronting us. It is also because we know our own capacity for wishful thinking, for delusion and self-deception. Perhaps we speak the truth with economy and grace, or perhaps we are simply whistling in the dark, shouting against the wind.

In this morning's gospel Jesus walks through the narrative never speaking so much as a single word. John does all the talking, turning attention away from himself to the One who is more fully present than any other human being. But he does not say to his disciples 'This is the Lamb of God'; he says 'Behold the Lamb of God.' In other words, look - look for yourselves, see all that is to be seen, allow the eyes of your hearts free reign, take in who is really here. Look at the man Jesus and see someone sent from God, see God the Lamb who comes gently and silently in self-giving love. Behold the Christ who, by his own selflessness, by his total generosity of spirit, his complete openness to the Spirit's breath, prepares for us the way of freedom and peace.

John knows perfectly well that he cannot make his disciples see what he sees, that they are free to see or not to see, that no one can do this work for them, that we must each catch the vision for ourselves. Faith cannot be handed over or handed on like a game of pass the parcel. It is always a matter of opening eyes, always a task of stirring imaginations, of evoking a sense of awe - not to conjure up what is not there, but to penetrate the veil, to touch the mystery. By all means let us be passionate about our faith, by all means let us be active in witnessing to its transforming power in all the places we live. Never feel embarrassed or ashamed to confess the hope that is in you, for we are followers of Christ Jesus who calls us to be with him on his journey to the Father. But let us never get carried away, slipping over from zeal into zealotry, from belief into bigotry, from faith into fanaticism.

Robert Runcie, one of the great 20th century Archbishops of Canterbury, liked to say there is a 'passionate coolness' about the Anglican way, but actually passionate coolness is characteristic of any faith worth the name. Every psychiatric ward has its share of people certain they are the Christ, usually housed in the same ward as those certain they are poached eggs. Real faith knows how little it knows and keeps us humble, it makes us more human not less. And part of being truly human is to doubt, to sit lightly to what we hold most dear, keeping a sense of proportion, keeping a sense of humour, being wisely skeptical – especially about ourselves. We breathe a particular air, but sanity demands a window permanently open to catch different breezes. For however convinced we may be, however trusting, however sure, it is always possible that we may be mistaken.

Sane religion keeps its powder dry, keeps the passion cool. We are to be tentative explorers, humble seekers after truth, standing together before the mystery in childlike wonder. It is worth remembering that the root of the words humiliation and humility is humus. Bishop John Taylor comments – 'To be down in the straw and the dung and the refuse – Paul's words – is to become the soil in which the seed of Christ's manhood falls and dies and brings forth the harvest. Here is the meeting of the four elements: we the earth, and the Spirit the wind, the water and the fire.'



Candlemass

Sunday 3rd February 2008

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Malachi 3:1-4; Hebrews 2:14-18; Luke 2:22-40

It is said that today's bitter-sweet festival is a 'hinge' of the Christian year, one of those pivotal points when we look at the big picture. On this day we take one last look back to the cradle, then turn our eyes toward the cross. So today Mary and Joseph come to the Temple in Jerusalem, Mary to be ritually purified after the defilement of childbirth, and to present Jesus, their first born son to God.

In Jewish tradition all first born males belong to God and must be dedicated to God's service. The laws of purification appoint the sacrifice of a lamb and a pigeon or a dove on this occasion, but those who were poor can substitute two pigeons or two doves. Mary's sacrifice

is Luke's way of signalling that she is a person of no standing, that she belongs to the poor of the land. Indeed, the whole supporting cast of characters in these first two chapters of Luke's gospel are uniformly portrayed as God's poor. Elizabeth and Zechariah and Simeon and Anna are the poor in spirit, those who await the consolation of Israel, looking for the redemption of Jerusalem, longing for the coming messiah. Mary and Joseph belong to the same social strata, and Mary is presented by Luke not simply as one of them, but as the epitome of their faith. Such people, and such people alone, are able to welcome God with genuine, open humility. They can do so precisely because they have no other hope, no pretensions about themselves or their circumstances, because they are empty and helpless and needy and naked. They know themselves as poor, so God is able to make them rich.

It has often been pointed out that there were crowds and crowds of people in the Temple when Mary and Joseph bring the child Jesus to do for him what the law of the Lord requires. All have come to worship God, and yet all they see is two rather ragged looking peasants and yet another baby boy. It is only Simeon and Anna who see more, so much more, and we are to see with them, with their eyes of faith. For such faith changes everything, transforming everything we touch. It is like switching on a light in a dark room, or driving back the shadows with a flaming torch. Common sense assures us that seeing is believing, yet we Christians live by uncommon sense: *believing* is seeing.

'Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary his mother, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed, so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

Believing is seeing, and seeing demands action. All it takes for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing. Carrying the light of Christ into the dark places of our lives, into the dark streets of our cities, into the cynical world of politics, exposing our monstrous denial of human suffering, demanding dignity and freedom for all – this is not child's play. With the light and the love comes suffering. Inevitably, there is the pain of misunderstanding, the pain of resistance and rejection, even the agony of betrayal by those we thought were friends and mistook for allies. The wood of the cradle and the wood of the cross are one and the same; they are all of a piece. We who go with God undoubtedly know the deepest joy, but we must also count the cost.

Elizabeth and Zechariah, Simeon and Anna, Mary and Joseph, pray for us. Pray that we may be faithful, little by little, day by day. Pray that we may have the courage of our convictions, respecting one another's integrity, especially when we differ. Pray that we will always be willing to stand up for those who cannot stand up for themselves. Pray that we may be found worthy of the promises of Christ.