

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2007

“CHRISTMAS INTERRUPTED”

TEXT: MATTHEW 2: 13 – 23

There is no other time in the year so filled with nostalgia and the possibility of being removed from the ordinariness of life than Christmas. On Christmas Eve, as we sang familiar carols, watched fledgling shepherds and angels take the stage and lit candles while singing “Silent Night”, two things, for that moment, became possible. First, those of us who have grown up in the Christian community are struck by the constancy of tradition. The carols are so rooted in us that the hymn book often seems redundant. It may be fifty years since we graciously accepted a place in the chorus line of shepherds rather than the coveted role of Joseph but it all seems like yesterday. On Christmas Day itself the rare moment of quiet in a city which for most of the year resists calm takes us back to times when the rhythm of life was much more accessible. The phone call to distant family members invokes memories of turkey laden tables and togetherness.

Second, this is a time of the year in which both religious tradition and secular consumerism conspire to make this season different from every other part of the year. From the decorations bordering on the gaudy to packed churches it often feels as if we have been plucked from the world as it is and, for a brief moment, time is suspended.

I was reflecting on this phenomenon on Boxing Day morning when the radio alarm went on. The news was filled with retrospectives on Boxing Day, 2004. You remember that Boxing Day. We awoke from the suspended time which we call Christmas to hear news of one of the worst natural disasters—the Indian Ocean tsunami—of recent times. It was a jarring experience to have the tranquil emotionality of the celebration of Christmas shattered by stories of death and destruction.

This year the suspended time we call Christmas included Boxing Day. It was the day after Boxing Day which brought us back to the reality and tragedy of human history. On December 27 we awoke to the news that Benazir Bhutto had been assassinated in Pakistan. This story was followed by further violence and that uneasy sense that what follows this tragedy may be even worse.

We may be tempted to think that this juxtaposition of the nostalgia and suspended time which is Christmas with the violence and uncertainty of our world is something unique in our time. However, when we read the narratives of the gospel we discover that our experience of the abrupt end of Christmas mirrors that story which we think of as familiar but which is often not.

Matthew's first two chapters take fragments of tradition and compress what would be a two to three year saga into a rapidly moving account. The story of the wise men is followed immediately by the flight of Mary, Joseph and Jesus into Egypt. This story of the refugees is set against the backdrop of the mass murder of young children by Herod. In one of the most moving articulations of the despair and agony which accompanies such tragic moments in the human story Matthew quotes Jeremiah: "A sound is heard in Ramah, the sound of bitter weeping. Rachel is crying for her children; she refuses to be comforted, for they are dead."

This story of the flight into Egypt is often seen as a mythic device to connect the story of Jesus with the story of the Exodus. The parallels are certainly evident. New life and hope emerge from the a time of enslavement/refuge in Egypt. The drama is set against the backdrop of the cruel excess of Pharoah/Herod which result in the death of innocents.

However, we can also look at this story as an embodiment of the human story in every age. When we heard the news from Pakistan the violence was perpetrated not just against a political leader. With her others were killed. In the rioting which followed and which continues others will perish. In the commentary which accompanied this tragedy individuals filled with despair about the future of their fragile nation spoke of the need to leave—to become a part of the stream of refugees which have moved throughout human history.

So, it remains for us to say two things about the story of the ruthless murder of innocents and the flight of Mary, Joseph and Jesus into exile in Egypt. The first thing is that in the biblical narrative the story is not frozen in time. The characters and the events are first century. However the story is one which was real a thousand years before it happened. The story is one which is real in our time. Violence and the displacement of people are a part of the human tragedy which knows no boundaries of time and place. Whatever else it is the Bible is not a vehicle of denial with regard to the human condition. Life, as we experience it and as those who gone before have done, can be cruel and unfair. Tyrants and natural disasters will continue to wreck havoc.

However, there is a second thing which needs to be said about this story. In his commentary on this passage from Matthew, John Wesley wrote in his notes: "God does not often, as he easily could, cut off their persecutors at a stroke. But he provides a hiding place for his people, and by methods not less effectual, though less pompous, preserves them from being swept away even when the enemy comes in like a flood." When Wesley speaks of the provision of a "hiding place" we can take that to literally mean a place of anonymity in Egypt. However, the meaning is much deeper than the specific reference to the story.

To this point there has been no resolution of the human tragedy. Two thousand years after the murders perpetrated by Herod, people are still being slain on the streets of Karachi and on the streets of Vancouver. As Wesley observes the

persecutors are rarely cut off with a stroke. Rather what does happen in the human drama is the appearance of hiding places. These may be safe havens in the city or in another land. But, more often, the “hiding places” are carried about in the imagination. The human drama is fraught with terror but it also contains powerful moments of compassion, joy and peace. Those moments when city is still and at peace, those moments when families—either inherited or chosen—delight in tradition, those carols written on our hearts and that story of a baby in a manger bringing new hope—all of these moments are real. They are interrupted with painful regularity by the tragedy of life and by the fear which they engender but they need not be destroyed by it.

Indeed it is these “hiding places” of the heart which are the essence of faith. Like the Biblical narrative, they do not deny the political, economic and social realities of our human journey. Rather they provide us with an alternate vision which enables us to resist the despair engendered by the tragic dimension of human life. Equally important, they enable us to seek us ways both individually and collectively, to live our lives and to make decisions which resist those acts of tyranny which lead to tragedy. Secure in the knowledge—that mysterious, God-given hiding place of the heart—that compassion and peace are as real (and, indeed, with the boldness of faith we proclaim more real and the very stuff of eternity) as oppression and war, in our words and in our actions, in ways both big and small, we are empowered to subvert the machinations of the Herods of our world.

In one sense, then, Christmas can seem to be interrupted when we turn on the radio on Boxing Day or on the day after Boxing Day. However the essence of Christmas—the little peasant family on the verge of becoming refugees holding within itself the Prince of Peace—can, by the grace of God, find a “hiding place” within us which resists interruption.

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