

Wednesday 24 December 2008: Midnight Mass

Do not be afraid

Readings: Isaiah 52:7-10; John 1: 1-14

*Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.
The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

“Oh my God! Look at that picture over there. Isn't that something.” Those were the words of Frank Borman, Commander of Apollo 8, forty years ago, Christmas Eve 1968. He and his fellow astronauts, Bill Anders and Jim Lovell, became the first humans to see their home planet from another world. Anders was to capture the moment in “Earthrise”, one of the most famous photographs ever taken – and which is reproduced on the front cover of the service sheet tonight.

The television audience for that broadcast was at the time the largest ever recorded. Gathered around the television set, watching the mission of Apollo 8 is one of my earliest memories. For some reason, I remember vividly the gender split in our household in reaction to what was going on – mother, grandmother and aunts worried that the men might never return; father, grandfather, brothers and uncles fascinated by the stream of information being fed to the watchers, and the whole concept of human being conquering space. Apollo 8, and the subsequent space flights leading up to the moon landing of Apollo 11 in July the following year, were the culmination of years of planning and the dream set forth by John F. Kennedy of setting a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s.

On Christmas Eve, forty years ago, it seemed that the sky was no longer the limit; it seemed that humanity was on the brink of a technological breakthrough that would take us beyond the limits of this planet – that the wildest dreams of science fiction were about to become a reality; that scientific knowledge and human effort could enable us to create space of our own defining.

Forty years on, and the confidence of that Christmas Eve has, if not quite evaporated, and then certainly with hindsight seems to have been over-optimistic. It's not that technology hasn't delivered. It has in spadeloads, and however we may romanticise our longing for simplicity, few of us who have grown used to instant communication, and digital networks would want to do away with them altogether. But for all that we have advanced in those forty years, many of the underlying doubts and fears that led people to see those spectacular images from Apollo 8 as the first glimpse of a new dawn, many of those doubts and fears are still all too real.

Forty years ago, it was war in Vietnam and civil unrest in many cities in the United States and in Europe that unsettled and prompted people to look for certainties elsewhere. This Christmas Eve, we come with different, but all too real questions, doubts, fears, anxieties. The successor to the great white heat of technology – the triumph of capitalism, has also failed to answer our deepest questions, silence our deepest doubts. This time we thought we could create space of our own defining by unlimited economic growth, by letting the financial systems carry the risks and by letting virtual money wash around our accounts, delaying the time of payback seemingly indefinitely.

Again, most of us in this city and in cities and towns throughout the land bought into that dream, willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly. And now many, from the heads of major financial institutions to the person wondering where the next mortgage payment is coming from is asking how we missed the signs, how we failed to spot the inevitability of a credit crunch waiting to happen. Suddenly the spaces we occupy and which define our hopes and our dreams, feel under threat both physically and metaphorically. In those spaces of fear, we disbelieve most of the promises that are made, start to distrust words that might not have foundation in reality. Other apparent certainty has let us down.

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Two thousand years ago in another city, another dream was at its zenith. The might of Rome and its influence was continuing to spread over most of what is now Europe and Asia Minor. At the risk of recreating a Monty Python sketch in the pulpit, there's no doubt that the Romans did do plenty for us in the western world, until that Empire too crumbled. But in that small, apparently unobtrusive city of Bethlehem, where Roman rule showed its muscle in taxes and censuses, there was also fear and apprehension, doubts and insecurity. In those spaces of fear too, it was easy to disbelieve the promises of the Romans or distrust the leaders of the Jewish community anxious to keep what power they still had.

Into that space of fear and in security, God spoke one Word. Not a word of triumphant certainty, but one small creative word in flesh and blood. A Word so small that most people missed it. Yet when other words were silenced, and other promises failed, the light of that Word continued to shine in the darkness and the darkness of doubt and fear did not overcome it.

Six centuries before that in another besieged and beleaguered space – the city of Jerusalem, the prophet Isaiah also spoke words that were almost too small for most to hear, yet for those that did, those words too provided purpose and meaning that would live beyond the turbulence of human failure and beyond the more obvious realities of destruction and violence all around them.

Last year, I spent a month on retreat focussing on the Gospel stories of the life of Jesus, and other scripture passages. In those stories of birth and life and death that I pondered during that time, there was a persistent word that spoke to me over and over again. A word that said “Do not be afraid”. It's the word the angel Gabriel speaks to Mary when he tells her she is to be the mother of God's Son. It's the word the angel speaks to Joseph, in telling him to take Mary as his wife. It's the word that the angels speak to the shepherds on the hillside when they announce the good news of a Saviour born for them. It's the word that Jesus speaks when he calls his disciples, and the word he speaks to them when he greets them risen from the tomb – “do not be afraid”. It's at the heart of the good news in which we rejoice tonight – it's the message of the light that shines in the darkness – do not be afraid.

The Word that spoke creation into being at the beginning of time, now creates space in our world in a small, vulnerable child – a child who becomes the good news made flesh and in whose smallness and vulnerability we have no need to be afraid.

It's a small, persistent word, that speaks into situations of fear and insecurity, of confidence and of doubt; a word that continues to speak when other words have been silenced or have ceased to have meaning.

Seven months after Apollo 8, Neil Armstrong became the first man to stand on the surface of the moon. To him standing there, the earth appeared tiny in the distance, so tiny that when he held up his hand, he could blot out the earth with his thumb. “Did that make you feel really big, he was asked years later? “No, he replied, “it made me feel really, really small.”

This night, in the child of Bethlehem, the God who creates the vastness of the universe enters our world in a space so small that it is barely noticeable; yet in human vulnerability the Creator speaks a Word that enters our hearts, our lives, our world, our doubts, our fears, our insecurities, our hopes, our dreams and changes them forever.

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