Thursday 25 December 2008: Christmas Day

The Blessing of God

Readings: Isaiah 9.2-7; Luke 2.1-20

Light is one of the most powerful and universal religious images. Plato knew there is only one light, but the different forms are infinitely expressive – from a flickering candle to a powerful flood light, from the subtle uplighter in the corner of the lounge to the starkness of the fluorescent strip in the kitchen.

For Bhuddists, life’s journey is towards enlightenment. In the public space of Trafalgar Square, Hinduism’s Diwali with its crowded festival of many lights has been succeeded by the Oslo Christmas tree and the Crib, joined this week by the Jewish menorah for Hanukah. The means of expression and the form and quality of the light represented speak volumes about religious self-understanding. If the menorah strikes me as dominant and overpowering, the alleged gentle humility of the Christ child might strike non Christians as less than obvious when we claim he is the light of the world.

The prophet Isaiah said, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined”. The angels appeared in the night sky to the shepherds rejoicing at the birth of Jesus. They are in visual contrast to what will be Good Friday’s darkness at noon.

Light works especially well in the short days/long nights of a northern hemisphere winter. The Russian mystic St Seraphim of Sarov said, “The darker the night, the brighter the stars”. You can still feel that in a city centre, where there is so much ambient light it is never fully dark. You can still feel it in the daylight of Christmas morning when we are coming to terms with the events of the night that has past and the opportunities of the day ahead. The light illuminates and guides, but also asks searching questions about where our hearts are, what we want to do with our lives, how we live in response to what we have seen and known.

Now it would be wonderful if life from this moment on were all sweetness and light but that’s not how life is, nor is it how the Bible story goes. According to Matthew and Luke, the birth of Jesus is at one with his suffering and crucifixion. The Magi brought gold for a king, incense for God, and myrrh for the cold tomb. The Holy Family fled Bethlehem and the slaughter of the innocents for the safety of exile in Egypt and the lamb traditionally pictured as the gift of the shepherds becomes the Passover lamb: Christ the lamb of God, sacrificed to lead people to freedom. What is certain is not that the way of Jesus is smooth but that light and love are what matter. Live with even a glimmer and there is a world of hope.

One of my favourite Christmas letters this year came from a Benedictine monk at St John’s Abbey in Minnesota where I was on sabbatical in September/October. Brother Dietrich Reinhart has cancer. In his letter he said he’s been thinking about dying his hair
magenta because he is just beginning chemotherapy and his hair will fall out. Rather than lament the loss, he thought that if his hair were magenta, everyone will say thank goodness Dietrich’s hair has fallen out.

In October, Dietrich gave me a book of Blessings by the late John O’Donohue, an Irish teacher, poet and former priest, ‘To Bless the Space Between Us’, perfect for our St Martin’s Advent theme of ‘Creating Space’. There are blessings for everything, beginnings, endings and everything in between.

“It would be infinitely lonely to live in a world without blessing”, writes John O’Donohue. “The word blessing evokes a sense of warmth and protection, it suggests that no life is alone or unreachable. Each life is clothed in raiment of spirit that secretly links it to everything else. Though suffering and chaos befall us, they can never quench that inner light of providence.”

Jews are taught to give at least 100 blessings a day. Priests give a lot of blessings, not necessarily 100 a day but a lot, especially in the weeks of Advent leading up to Christmas. I’ve often said the blessing used at the end of some of the Carol services:

May the joy of the angels
the eagerness of the shepherds,
the perseverance of the wise men,
the obedience of Joseph and Mary,
and the peace of the Christ child
be yours this Christmas

And I’ve been thinking about one for St Martin’s on Christmas morning which might start:

May the ingenuity of the bellringers who arrived early this morning with flasks of coffee but no cups;
the graciousness of the Stewards who have turned hundreds of people away from Carol services for which they had travelled miles and are still here to welcome us in this morning;
the humility of the Vergers answering the same question 200 times as if it were always new;
the dexterity of our Director of Music who broke his arm two weeks ago and has played the organ with one hand;
the harmony of our small choir who have come back for Christmas morning;
the unity of a congregation made up of people from all over the world;
the doggedness of the clergy who have been to more carol services than is good for anyone;
and the wonder of the two babies in the front row transfixed by the light of the Christmas candle
be yours this Christmas.

It’s not 100 but it is a start and you can go on adding your own blessings as the day goes on.
Blessings both pronounce the fact of the peace of God which passes all understanding, and ask that it comes upon people. Either we are invoking what is already there, a natural state that needs to be drawn out and encouraged to flourish, or we are laying something upon people as God’s gift to them.

If what I want for us from God’s blessing is ‘good luck’, the evidence is that Christians do no better than anyone else. If what we want from God’s blessing is for Christ to be with us, to sustain and enliven us, to enlarge our hearts and sympathies, to show us the way of light, love and peace, then I know that to be possible. It is my deepest hope this Christmas for each of us, for our homes and families and for our world. The blessing of God in Christ is why this is a very happy Christmas.