Sunday 23 December 2007: Fourth Sunday of Advent

Ask for a sign

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

I can’t help but feel sorry for poor old Ahaz. On the face of it he seems to be saying and doing the right thing – he’s not asking for a sign and he’s not putting God to the test. But he gets the full blast of prophetic wrath from Isaiah and the promise that, like it or not, he will receive a sign from God – the sign of a child who was to be Immanuel – God-with-us.

I can’t quite fathom what lies behind that little exchange between King Ahaz and Isaiah – and reading the Biblical commentators it seems that not many of them can either! – but the result is a sign; a puzzling, strange, hidden and yet totally everyday sign – the sign of a baby born to a woman. Perhaps Ahaz the King, fearful that his Kingdom was about to be usurped by two of the neighbouring powers, expected that the sign of God-with-us would be grand and spectacular – a military victory to reinforce the Kingdom of Judah as special in God’s sight. What he got was the ordinary and utterly missable – a young woman shall bear a son.

God, of the being of the Father,
the only Son from before time began;
human from the being of his mother, born in the world;
fully God and fully human;

From the time that the story of Jesus began to be told, the struggle to reconcile that dilemma of Ahaz has focussed the minds of theologians and philosophers – and the minds of those of us who have no claims to be either. Who is this person we call God and yet see in human flesh? What is this sign that comes among us in the hiddenness of the ordinary, in the pain of childbearing? Theologians have tried to capture this mystery of the incarnation, in the words I’ve just quoted and which we’ve been reciting as our creed throughout Advent. Through the centuries battles have been fought over heresy and orthodoxy and splits and schisms have resulted as this most ordinary sign of God-with-us has confounded even the bravest and most well-turned ways of describing it. That’s not to belittle the language of theology – or the prayer and meditation and spiritual struggle and profound encounters that lies behind that creed we will recite. It’s simply to say that even I, who’s for ever trying to systemise the unsystemisable knows that theological doctrines can say scarcely a fraction of what it means for a child to bear the name Immanuel, God-with-us.

Perhaps the language of poetry read alongside the language of systematic theology helps to peel back one or two of the layers and enables us to read a little more of this most ordinary and mysterious of signs; poetry like Elizabeth Jennings’ stunningly wonderful account of the Annunciation.

“So from her ecstasy she moves
And turns to human things at last
(Announcing angels set aside).
It is a human child she loves
Though a god stirs beneath her breast
And great salvations grip her side."

Here is this young woman, Mary, who bears the child and becomes the fulfilment of the sign Ahaz could not bring himself to recognise, and it is her collaboration with the divine that makes the sign visible. Yes, Mary is indeed full of grace, and is quite rightly given a place of honour in our church tradition, and yet she, like the child she bears is so ordinary as to be utterly missable.

When I was on retreat last summer, I pondered again this great mystery of God-with-us in that most unexpected yet ordinary way. In response I drew, or at least attempted to draw, a picture of the moment when the birth of God as a human child is announced by the archangel Gabriel. My gifts as an artist are on the lower end of non-existent, so I don’t anticipate that this picture will ever adorn a gallery wall, but for some reason I gave it a name – I called it “The Annunciation in the undercroft of St George’s Bloomsbury”. St George’s is the site of our temporary offices while our building next door undergoes refurbishment, and when you walk into it looks pretty much like any other office you might see – desks, phones, computers, paper, files and folders. In my picture, the ordinary home of Mary of Nazareth and that extraordinary moment that changed the world, moved to an ordinary place of work. I drew people sitting at their desks, and people walking past the front door. I drew buses on the road outside and people hurrying along carrying shopping bags and absorbed in their daily lives. At the top right of the picture I drew something that represented the God the Holy Trinity – it was a nod in the direction of Rublev’s icon in colours, if not in style. And from that symbol of God’s energy and passion and creativity and grace exploded a stream of light that burst through the walls and caused the person on whom it landed to be flung backwards off the chair, while the computer on the desk in front of them burst into flames! And all around, inside and out, people carried on with their work, answered the phones, caught their buses, did their shopping. God had exploded into the world in the life of one person and apparently no-one had noticed.

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

It is a human child she loves
Though a god stirs beneath her breast
And great salvations grip her side."

Perhaps that picture told me that more than ever, I’m struck now by the hiddenness of God – by the mystery of God, by the feeling that the signs through which God speaks to me are not the ones I expect; that I don’t find God in the places I think to look for God; but that in the places where I least expect it, that explosive energy and creativity and passion and grace flings me out of my comfort zone and turns my assumptions upside down; and asks me the question that Jesus was to ask of his disciples – who do you say that I am?

In Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus, we don’t get donkeys, or mangers, or inns or shepherds, though we will later get the wise men. Matthew is not so much concerned with the details of the sign as to who the signs point to. He’s not interested in how it happens. Instead he prompts us to face the question “Who is this?” What does this mysterious hidden sign of a young woman bearing a child as the world goes on unnoticing, tell us? Who is this child, ignored and unrecognised by so many? In a paradox which I love, Matthew gives us one answer and also gives us three. This child is quite simply “The one who shows us God”.

It is a human child she loves
Though a god stirs beneath her breast
And great salvations grip her side.”
And this child is Jesus the Messiah – the holy and anointed one of God in whom God’s glory is visible. This child is Immanuel, God-with-us. The child is Jesus, the saviour who will save his people from their sins.

Messiah, Immanuel, Saviour – in the utterly missable ordinariness of a young woman who bears a child.

It is a human child she loves  
Though a god stirs beneath her breast  
And great salvations grip her side.”

But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test. Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

So perhaps in solidarity with Ahaz, who got the sign he didn’t ask for and which he least expected, we can ask ourselves the questions – where do we least expect to see signs of God-with-us? Who or what is the sign of God’s great salvation that has passed us by because we never thought to look there?. What puzzling, strange, hidden and so easily missable sign of God might knock us off our feet today and shake all the assumptions that familiarity and certainty can bring? Perhaps by pondering those questions, we might find ourselves reading the signs of the one who shows us God – and who is Messiah, Saviour and Immanuel.

Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.