Monday 25 December 2006: Christmas Day

A city not forsaken


Try as I (& Google, and my nephew’s smelly sock joke book) might, I couldn’t quite find a Christmas joke that fitted my theme this morning, so I’m afraid all you’ve got is:

What type of motor bike does Santa ride?
_A Holly Davidson_

What game do reindeer play in their stalls?
_Stable tennis_

How does Good King Wenceslas like his pizza?
_Depth and crisp and even!

And finally, what did Adam say to his wife the day before Christmas?
_It’s Christmas, Eve._

Actually, the preponderance of Christmas jokes that a Google search produces shows that Christmas has managed to survive and even re-invent itself across the technological revolution even if the majority of the jokes are about Santa and reindeer rather than the Gospel story.

But the ability of the Christmas story to speak across ages and cultures is one of its most profound features. A couple of weeks ago, on the day the newly designed Christmas crib was placed in the heart of Trafalgar Square, people immediately flocked to it. Again there was an odd crossing of cultures as people got out their mobile phones to take pictures or to hold conversations like that went “Yes, it’s a nativity, just you like do in school, right in the middle of Trafalgar Square!”

_The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: Say to daughter Zion, "See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him." They shall be called, "The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord"; and you shall be called, "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken."_

Today over half the world’s population live in cities (as compared to one third, some 30 or so years ago). In some parts of the world, notably North and Central America, that figure rises to over 80%. If the vision of Isaiah, that the people of God should be a city not forsaken is actually to be fulfilled then, it seems, the opportunities are growing rather than diminishing. But a we know, looks can be deceptive. Beneath the surface of even a vibrant, prosperous and relatively peaceful city such as London lie despair, poverty and loneliness. For every one who comes into this city to celebrate this time of year, there are those who are desperate to escape the tensions and the feeling of being trapped by the very structures that are meant to bring a sense of freedom and well-being. It seems to be a global phenomenon that cities act as magnets for those who want a share in that apparent prosperity and vibrant way of life that the 24-hour culture of city centres seems to provide. The reality of urban living for many millions worldwide is the squalor of shanty towns, life on the streets, and an attempt to escape through the fleeting but ultimately destructive comforts of drugs or alcohol.
"Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

At the heart of the Christmas story is a promise that a child born in the less than salubrious surroundings of a backstreet stable in an overcrowded city 2000 years ago is good news of great joy to all people, then, now and to the ends of the earth.

Actually when you stop and think about it, a great deal of scripture is given over to the hopes invested in and characterised by cities. The Bible may start in a garden but it ends with the vision of a new city, and throughout its pages it seems that cities are often the people of encounter between God and God’s people. The Holy City, the city of peace, Zion, is the place that embodied the hope of the people of Israel. When the Messiah came, it would be to his throne in the city of Jerusalem. Jesus himself was only too aware of that when he entered the city of Jerusalem hailed as the one who came in the name of the Lord, although the ultimate irony was that his ignominious enthronement on the cross was to take place outside the city walls.

The prophet Isaiah and others wrote much of their words to the Jewish people in exile, far from Jerusalem. They held out a vision of a city and a temple restored – a hope that the people would worship once again in the place where God dwelt once more in their midst. Actually by the time the words we heard from Isaiah were written, it’s likely that many of the people had returned – and perhaps things had not worked out as positively as the people had hoped. But the calling of the prophet is to continue to hold out the vision of God who dwells among his people, both in the hope of the restored Jerusalem and amidst the rubble that was their actual experience of return:

Go through, go through the gates, prepare the way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples... you shall be called, "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken."

Luke the evangelist doesn’t, in my opinion at least, quite display the visionary instincts of an Isaiah, but he does possess a historian’s attention to detail. When he tells us about the birth of Jesus, he paints a picture of the city of David in the broader context of powers of the day. And beneath the details, you can see, hear and smell the squalid overcrowded streets, the weary crowds, not quite sure why they’re there except that “A decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered”. You can almost sense the feeling of powerlessness of hundreds, thousands of displaced people on the move at a word from a distant power and the simmering resentment that brought – echoed in thousands of cities across the world today.

And into this all too familiar scenario, Luke tells us that the vision of Isaiah is fulfilled in a way that is disturbing and disarming is in its obvious simplicity:

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 
And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth.

You shall be called, "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken."

The God who refuses to forsake his people, or his city, takes his place among them – in the most surprising and yet most obvious way, the very flesh and blood of humanity. And the
God born in a city, was to make that promise one which crosses the very limits of time and space in his death and resurrection on the edges of another city, 30 years later.

So what is the point, novelty or photographic value apart, of placing a crib in the heart of multicultural, multifaith, perhaps we might less optimistically say, materialistic, cynical London in 2006?

Well, I’d like to think, that in the story it tells of the birth of a child, it speaks as powerfully and as eloquently as anything we can conceive or imagine of the vision of Isaiah and the promises of God. I’d like to think that in this story of a birth long ago, this city of London, and cities throughout the globe, might know the reality of Isaiah’s words:

*The Lord has proclaimed to the end of the earth: "See, your salvation comes; You shall be called, "The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord"; and you shall be called, "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken".*