

Sermon preached by James Knowles

Sunday 30 December 2018

St Edmundsbury Cathedral

In 1<sup>st</sup> Century Palestine, where religion was almost inseparable from daily life, the only education on offer was religious and the only reading material the scriptures. St. Luke's first readers would therefore have known the story of the boy Samuel, and so would therefore have seen nothing odd about an intelligent boy like Jesus questioning the religious leaders in the Temple and arguing with them. Even today, in Orthodox Jewish circles, Bible study starts at an early age. In ultra orthodox circles, some boys and men spend their lives doing little else. At thirteen, all Jewish boys have a Bah-mitzvah at which they must read publically from the Hebrew Torah.

Jesus' parents were devout enough to go the trouble and expense every year of travelling the seventy miles from Nazareth to Jerusalem. To a village boy there would of course have been all the excitement of

going to the big city, but to someone on the edge of adolescence with Jesus' ability, it must have been thrilling to hear all that he had been studying and thinking about discussed and disputed openly by the most respected rabbis of his time. For Christians, formal religious beliefs are the result of councils, commissions and synods, but then and even today in Judaism, belief develops and is tested by prominent rabbis who have their own followers, between whom dispute remains as lively as ever. There is a saying, 'Ask two rabbis, and you will get three opinions'! Jesus obviously got enthralled and provoked a family crisis: under the circumstances, Mary's words seem quite restrained: Joseph says nothing; he has the most important non-speaking role in scripture!

Luke's in his gospel has recorded Jesus' ministry, and in Acts has told us what happened next. Luke's primary purpose was to show that Jesus is God's Chosen One-the Messiah, and this story was aimed at the two constituencies within the fledgling Christian community. For the first-an often-sceptical Jewish

one, Luke emphasises that Jesus was not some maverick, half-educated country bumpkin from Nazareth with outlandish ideas, but someone who was rooted in the Jewish scriptures and tradition. Luke reminded the other constituency, gentile Christians, who hadn't got that background, that although they were not obliged to observe Jewish law and customs, Jesus was not another new member of the pagan pantheon with which they had grown up, where gods could assume or cast off different forms, either human or animal, at will, but was, in Hebrew- the Messiah or in Greek, the Christ, the word made flesh of the one true God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob- God incarnate.

Christmas is the 'Feast of the Incarnation', but the theological term 'Incarnation' covers the whole of Jesus' life. It is the mystery that Jesus Christ is both God and man. It is capable of being understood in many ways, but speaking as it does of the Infinite, its meaning can never be fully comprehended, expressed or exhausted. It is also capable of being

misunderstood: the controversies of the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Centuries about Christ's nature which gave rise to the Church's creed, were virulent, violent and sometimes lethal, making our present political shenanigans look like pantomime slapstick. Because it is so hard to get our heads round the idea of Christ's two natures, we teeter between them with our own mental pictures in which Jesus is sometimes wholly God or wholly man. We often want Jesus to be a Superman, who can solve our problems at a stroke. In a recent poll, people were asked if they thought a dictator would do better in solving our current crises; though those who said 'yes' were a minority, the group with the biggest proportion of 'yes' votes, were the young. In contrast other people would be happier if Jesus was just a good man; the miracles and the Resurrection don't sit easily with our sceptical, secular, scientific upbringing.

Jesus was a healer and a charismatic teacher, unlike anyone his contemporaries had ever encountered. He was his own man, who refused his disciples' pressure

to lead resistance leader to the Romans. In a society of exacting moral standards, where many fell short or were excluded by race, religion and fear of disease or spiritual contamination, Jesus would draw such people to Himself. His purpose was always to further God's Kingdom, to get people to look through Him to the Father and to see that God's judgement, though righteous, was merciful and compassionate.

Down the years, Jesus Christ has been given many titles, prominent among them that of Saviour. Saviour is a loaded word; although one widely accepted interpretation has been that Jesus is the perfect sacrificial victim who bore God's wrath on our behalf, it is possible and more helpful to see Him as God offering us Himself to suffer, in compassion, the consequences not of God's, but our wrath, in order to overcome it and to redeem and change the world.

At Christmas, we naturally concentrate more on the light and warmth at the centre of the Nativity scene and less on what was going on at the edges.

Bethlehem is 2500 feet above sea level; nights can be cold. A stable is smelly and probably flea-ridden, and isn't designed to keep humans comfortable. Beyond the manger, Herod's men were looking for and massacring male babies. Today that massacre of innocents continues unabated. The war in Syria where children have been bombed and gassed has shocked us all; and the conflict in Yemen, means that fourteen million people are on the edge of starvation. It is reckoned that one child in six has not got a proper home. There are 21.3 million refugees who have fled their country; and 40.8 million are internally displaced in their own countries and there are another 3.2 million seeking asylum, in total, equivalent to the population of France. For many of these people there may never be any room at the inn.

The world has never been particularly compassionate, but it seems that today human compassion is even shorter supply, not just in the way we behave towards these unfortunates, but in the way we treat each other. Brexit has exposed cracks in

our social cohesion that years of prosperity had papered over. Political divisions have allowed personal and communal resentments to bubble up. The semi-anonymity of social media has enabled some individuals to say and threaten vile things that they would never formerly have dared to express openly. As the Brexit debate in Parliament has approached, its public expression has got even more ugly with words like 'traitor' and 'betrayal' being bandied about freely. At a demonstration in London earlier this month, someone was seen carrying an imitation gallows on which to hang Mrs May. Extremist voices have become louder in Germany, Austria Italy and Spain. The 'yellow jacket riots' in France threatened anarchy. Politics in the USA show no sign of becoming less vitriolic. The democratic developed world seems to be full of people shouting at each other ever more loudly, with fewer and fewer people being prepared to listen.

Few of us will approach 2019 with boundless optimism. We feel helpless and wonder what we as

individual believers and as the Body of Christ can or should do. Why we believe and vote as we do is a matter for our consciences and our private prayers, but how we express our views and how we treat those with whom we disagree is a legitimate and necessary matter for Christian debate. It is here that we, both as individual Christians, and together as the church, have more than a role; we have a vocation of reconciliation.

First we begin with ourselves. Writing to Colossians, Paul tells them to bear with and to forgive one another. Jesus said, 'Do not judge so that you may not be judged. For with the judgement you make you will be judged and the measure you give will be the measure you get'. We first have to look into our own hearts, because we very often condemn in others the things we don't like about ourselves. We can only dare to face our darker side if we remember John's words. 'If our conscience condemns us, God is greater than our hearts and knows everything'. We need the gift of self-restraint to keep silent unless absolutely

necessary, to listen before we speak, and then always to speak with charity.

Christ's Incarnation is not a theological concept to be analysed, but an experience to be embraced. At its heart is God in Jesus Christ, reconciling the world to himself. As we are reconciled to each other, we become a part of Christ's Incarnation and are caught up in a virtuous spiral. Thus the word is made flesh in us, that so when we receive the outward symbols of Christ's body and blood in The Eucharist, we are receiving a foretaste of our true destiny, as partakers in the agony and ecstasy of the Divine nature, the eternal love dance that is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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