

Turning Point of Time Advent 4 – 19th December 2010

Readings:

Isaiah 7: 10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1: 18-26

I don't know how many of you listen to Radio National late at night, but if you do, you will have heard one Philip Adams pontificating on all manner of things. I love him, with his caustic wit and insightful comments on life in Australia. And I love it when almost every time he has a guest, he swings the conversation around to God and to what his guest believes. He's obsessed with God. Which is all the more remarkable because he claims to be an atheist. God means a lot to him, which is not surprising since Philip was a child of the manse. But obviously Philip Adams has dealt with God's claims upon him by relegating God to the land of fanciful and wishful thinking.

But it is not only Philip Adams who has had to work out what they are going to do with this "God problem". For everyone, sooner or later asks the God question. How many of you parents has been asked the God question by your child? It seems to be always at a time you're not expecting. How did you answer? But it is not just children that are asking. The upsurge in books of late advocating an atheistic answer to the question I believe is indicative of an uncertainty that is abroad in our world where human beings are worried about the future. Climate change, geopolitical change, financial insecurity all point to a turning point in time.

So it is instructive in looking at our three readings for this Sunday, six days before Christmas, to determine how each of the main characters in our readings have dealt with God's call upon themselves. The rebellious king, Ahaz, the confused carpenter, Joseph, and the reformed fundamentalist Paul. Each of the three men had their lives thrown into turmoil when God came to them and each of them dealt with God's call in different ways. Ways in which each of us might deal with the call we receive from God.

There was Ahaz - king of the small southern kingdom of Judah. Terrified of his neighbours, Syria and the Northern kingdom of Israel. God comes to him through Isaiah the prophet and tells him not to worry, God will prevail. But Ahaz is having none of it. He doesn't need God in his life. But God persists, thru Isaiah again, Ahaz is asked to ask for a sign so he can be sure God is with him. But he refuses even to do that. In the end an exasperated Isaiah tells the king that it's bad enough that he is wearying his subjects with all his goings on but that he is also wearying God. So God has chosen to give him a sign whether he wants one or not - a young woman will bear a child whose very name will mean what God has been trying to tell Ahaz. His name will be Immanuel - "God with us." And before that child is even weaned, the two kings he's so worried about will be dead and gone and their kingdoms will be no more.

But it doesn't do any good. Ahaz doesn't listen. He refuses to listen. His whole life has been based on the assumption that God won't come to him. He chooses to be God forsaken. How

many of us choose to live God forsaken lives, even after we are faced with the greatest sign God has ever sent, Immanuel the Christ Child.

But not all of us are as lucky as Ahaz, being offered a clear sign of God's presence with us. Indeed poor old Joseph must have wondered what on earth was happening to him. His fiancée is with child and he is not responsible for the pregnancy. A righteous man, he struggles with the dilemma. The Law says that Mary should be exposed and stoned. But he loves Mary, so he chooses to do otherwise. He chooses to put love before law. To value the sanctity of human life, and in making his righteous decision, God comes to him. Indeed he is encouraged to be even more outrageous - marry the woman Mary! And so Mary is taken to Bethlehem, and God Immanuel is born, someone who would also put love before law. God comes to Joseph in his uncertainty.

For many of us, Joseph's experience is our experience. God often appears absent. We struggle as Joseph must have, to make sense of what is happening to us. And in the struggle God makes himself known. God comes to us in our desperation. At least that's how it's been for me. Late at night unable to sleep and calling out for a God who seems absent. And suddenly there is a peace. God Immanuel is there with me.

Then there is the Pharisee Paul. Paul or Saul, as he was initially known, was a fundamentalist Jew. Sadly these days we know a lot about fundamentalists - Jew, Moslem and Christian - and what they can do in our world. Paul, was so sure he knew all about God, that he was initially blinded to God coming in a different guise, that of a humble human being. Eventually God has to knock Paul over and blind him so that he can see - the reality that God is with us. Immanuel has come, to show us the way to God. Paul, unlike Ahaz, is turned around and his breathless introduction in his letter to the Romans is a statement of what he believes. And its core belief is that God is with us.

So what of us this Sunday before Christmas? What do we make of God's sign in the form of a baby born in a manger? Are we full of certainty, saying in our hearts, like Ahaz, there is no God so why look for a sign. Or perhaps we are like Saul also full of certainty only this time his certainty is that God has revealed all that he is going to, and so he initially misses the new life that has come in Jesus the Christ. Perhaps, like Saul, we too need to be knocked off our high horse and blinded so that we might see.

Or perhaps, I suspect, it is more likely that we are like Joseph, confused seeking God's help, God's direction for our future. Open to any sign that God might make.

More than ever before, this war-weary world of ours needs signs from God that violence, greed and self-interest do not have the last word. We need to be awake, awake and ready to see what the Christ Child can do. God sent the Christ Child into the world to be a light to the nations, to be Immanuel - God with us. And in seeing the Christ and in choosing to follow him, we can have hope in an uncertain world.

The Church, Christ's body on earth, is charged with the incarnational task of continuing to proclaim that God is in our midst.

That God through the Christ child is reaching out to those who feel crushed by the world around them. At this turning point of time, when our world is failing to read the signs from God, more than ever, the Church has to speak with the voice of the Christ, a voice that speaks up for the homeless in our world, that would feed the hungry, and give hope to the poor. To be reconcilers rather than bystanders in the conflicts that threaten to destroy our world.

So let me finish with a poem by the martyred South American bishop, Oscar Romero called "Incarnate." in "A Worship Anthology for Christmas" p 43.

*Christ became a man of his people and of his time:
he lived as a Jew,
he worked as a labourer of Nazareth
and since then he continues
to become incarnate in everyone.
If many have distanced themselves from the Church,
it is precisely because the Church
has often distanced itself from humanity.
But a Church that can feel as its own
all that is human
and wants to incarnate the pain,
the hope,
the affliction of all who suffer
and feel joy,
such a Church will be Christ loved and awaited,
Christ present.
And that depends on us.
At this turning point of time may we experience the birth of the Christ within!*

*Rev Tony Duncan
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pilgrim.tony@tassie.net.au*