

Christmas 2017

Midnight Communion

Psalm 98

John 1:1-14

“Are you dancin’?” a lad asks in a Liverpool night club

“Are you askin’?” replies the guy he fancies.

“I’m askin’” says the first.

“Then I’m dancin’” is the reply.

So they risk a dance, then a date and hopefully get it together.

I wonder if such playful rhetoric, the light touch poetry, the flirtation that barely conceals the fear of rejection is much more the realm we are in with the opening of John’s Gospel than that of dusty books of intricate theology. Are humanity and God ever going to get it together?

When we do weigh each other up and consider a date, we are passing judgement on each other. Judgement does happen. The question is whether it’s good judgement and what power dynamics it involves. Deciding on a date, it’s pretty equal. Both can veto. Either might feel rejected. When it comes to cosmic judgement by a creator we might feel rather suspicious of the imbalance. But judgement will and does happen, both ways.

The Psalm is a bright confident song celebrating divine judgement, not as something to fear but as something to feel relieved about. I wonder if it is a song for our time. Judgement is both fierce and murky in our political life, our cultural life, the culture of the press we disapprove of while gobbling its fayre so ravenously. We may well shudder at the judgments bellowed from America at the moment and the insults flung to and from North Korea, judgemental nuclear fire the threatened consequence. We are angry at arbitrary judgement and for some of us are less and less sure that the “will of the people” is quite so morally unassailable as post referendum rhetoric asserts. That appalling deluded sense of entitlement expressed through sexual harassment is rightly exposed to light, yet soon our judgments there start to become grey and blurred. Our grandchildren will pass judgement on our behaviour towards the planet we bequeath them. Our judgement of each other is a present reality. One wonders where we would be politically if the vast amount of energy spent trying to manage the judgement of others was actually spent enacting behaviour and policy that naturally warranted good judgement.

The politics behind that psalm is one of uneasy national identity, confidence easily shattered by experience of invasion and exile. The people of Israel have been through the mill, and have often as not got themselves into trouble, but the poet hopes contagious confidence in

God's judgement will put all human judgments and regimes in proper perspective, including their own judgements. For rather than seeing other nations trampled, he hopes all the earth will make a joyful noise to the Lord. It's the sound of musical instruments, not weapons he expects to hear. This poem is part of Israel's gradual journey to realising, yes, God is on their side, but only so they can be a blessing to the whole of humanity, not so they can lord it over anyone. Beautifully, the psalmist calls all creation to join in the praise, which in Hebrew poetry is always a playful idea, gently judging our willingness to praise and submit to God's merciful, loving judgement. Imagining hills singing, and floods clapping he says "they can manage it, how about us joining in?" It comically throws a light on our sullen reluctance to enjoy God. It more sternly judges our wilful arm-folding resentment and tendency to blame everyone else for, well, everything crap.

In a spirit of relief and gratitude, this song gives in to the knowledge that only God is a capable and desirable and reliable judge for all creation. Only God, whose love thought and spoke us into being, who pursued us through wilderness, who berated us in times of arrogance and nurtured us in times of hurt, and keeps coming back with suggestions of how we might get on, even though, unlike our dating, all the disruption is on one side, not the other, only the One whose judgement is borne of love and pursues reconciliation can be trusted to see the world as it really is.

Given we are innately suspicious of human judgement and project that suspicion onto God, there are also a remarkable number of voices and currents telling us their judgement is the only one that counts. Meanwhile, at a deep level, we need to know there is judgement for the likes of the Syrian president under whom by February this year 13,000 people had been executed in a single Damascus jail just since the beginning of the conflict. Must be near 15,000 by now. There must be judgement. I would clap along with the hills to see that one.

But even deeper inside us, I wonder if there is a more visceral yet plaintive plea for judgement of ourselves, some pure knowledge of our entire being, some sense of truth about us, even if it's a bit ugly or messy here and there. We recoil, yet we want to be known and touched that deeply. This kind of judgement is not some gavel hitting a court bench with a no going back sentence to follow. God's judgement is a loving knowledge; a knowing compassion; a perfect realism that, once accepted, releases possibility.

The light, cool relief one feels as forgiveness is declared after our perhaps pedestrian seeming confession in a service like this is just a hint of that new beginning. We are confident in making the declaration not as arrogant power wielding priests, but as people ordained to declare forgiveness with a community confidence, based firmly on the revelation of the character of God's judgement vividly displayed in the life of Christ. St John summarised his life as "Full of grace and truth." The pairing is crucial. With God, unlike our power-playing adjudications, God's truthful judgement always comes with grace, which is the kind of love that heals and changes things. That he came in such a way as to be unrecognisable to any who wish not to recognise him itself catches something of the essence of the character of God's judgement. Although God could manage without us and although it is not an equal partnership, God chooses to be with us and wants to be with us

to the point of accepting a pain and loss if we choose not to be with him. This is the heart that is judging us.

The child of which we sing, the God chooses not to come with an army's clanging weapons, but gives in to having his arms bound in swaddling cloths so we are free to behold and react to him, so of course, his very presence judges our manipulative behaviour.

The God who knows all things intimately, yet comes in this way proves that he is more interested by empathy than trickery, so when we behold him, his very presence and character exposes our power-mongery for what it is.

Suckling at the breast he judges our patriarchy,

Entering so fully into our physical life he judges our de-humanising objectification, be it in Asad's prisons or Weinstein's hotel suites to our own clumsy efforts at self-assertion. Choosing such dependence on a vulnerable couple, God indeed judges our fascination with dreary independence and reveals the grace and beauty of inter-dependence.

Coming without coercion God powerfully judges all our murderous and pettier tyrannies.

This judgement is a beginning, not an end. It isn't the frown of the law court. It is diagnosis before healing. It is the decision to form a relationship that could really go somewhere. This judgement is light, and the darkness has not overcome it.

It is a quality of judgement we need more than ever. The more shrill our human judgements, the more we need to pick up the apparently naïve song with clapping trees and singing hills. Divine judgement should surely be angry sometimes, but it is essentially the loving gaze more like that of one who wants a date, but who knows us better than we know ourselves. It is an insightful look of one who will not use that intimate knowledge to manipulate or compel relationship. This judgement is the light of life.

In this brief night-time encounter with God, flickering candles rather than flashing night club lights, we may wonder as new couples do, what will it be like being together in broad daylight? Will we still like each other on ordinary days?

But for now, we hear God ask "Are you dancing'?"

by being here, I guess, we at least respond "are you askin'?"

In the undefended Christ child he says "I'm askin'"....

"then..."

Christmas Morning 2017

Isaiah 62:6-end

Luke 2:1-20

A census means conscription. The concentric powers of Rome, old local ruling families and religious elites are functioning together to quantify the expendable male lives available to be disposed of in the service of the empire. A census means taxation. It means the Empire is adding insult to injury, occupying your land and making you pay for the occupation. It is also asking you to pay for the excellent roads so the army can move quickly to crush any rebellion you might be considering. We know how bureaucracy can crush imagination. But worse, we should not underestimate the heavy Roman hand on the shoulder, the fear of losing young men from your family, the orders from on high shaping the mind-set of the people. Between the massive imperial organisation and the population's hum drum daily life is a paranoid, egotistical king, Herod, who clings desperately to his threadbare royalty, hoping big buildings will secure a legacy. Meanwhile zealous insurgent groups from below want to attack the occupiers with what might be called asymmetric tactics. They divide opinion, but empire and terrorists both make very ugly assertions of independence.

Breaking in to the oppressive administration and terrorist threat, Luke tells us, God makes an entrance in a beguilingly off beat birth in a small, wobbly family. Defying the discomfort of their circumstance and belittling the Empire's tedious over-assertion, Mary and Joseph become parents, holding on to their humanity, making good, making do, performing the motherly tasks of wrapping and protecting. St Matthew shows us the troubled start for their relationship, but then the fierceness with which together they protect the child from the neurotic regime. (Incidentally, Herod's slaughter of male infants (Matthew 2) is of course self-defeating. He is diminishing his own future army of soldiers and construction workers, let alone tax payers. But that is the nature of bullying. It is ultimately self-destructive.) Luke has introduced Mary in chapter 1, showing her capacity for thankfulness, praise, alertness to God, and her delight in divine reversals that seem to happen when human hierarchies are settled. By the time they have returned from exile in Egypt, she and Joseph will have displayed a kind of open-eyed hope, a knowing compassion, a fiercely realistic love.

Their participation in the Saviour's story is the first reaction worth noting, and measuring our own against. For they ask: just how settled are we in the prevailing mind set of fear and judgementalism, independence and terror threats, neurotic bureaucracy and paranoia about what people will take off us? Just how ready are we to participate if called to unsettle common assumptions with hope? Are we ready to give anything up for that hope?

Not believing oneself to be loveable is a common and poignant vulnerability. Over compensation by self assertion is ugly and worrying. Equally, low self esteem can be enervating. Cynicism and Naivety mirror each other for their partial vision, their avoidance of responsibility, their self indulgence, and their life stunting effect. And yet confidence is difficult to nurture well, whatever age we are. It's the same for countries as it is for people. Israel didn't feel loveable. Years before Christ's birth when these prophecies collected under Isaiah's name were heard, Israel felt forsaken. But this bright, energised passage teems with the language of beauty and relationship:

you shall no longer be called desolate, but "you shall be called "my delight is in her"" (v 4)

Images of young love abound and Israel will not be the one left on the edge of the party feeling ugly, but will be "sought out" (V12) declared beautiful by God, her suitor.

If we were to generalise clumsily about humanity as a whole, how loveable are we? The way we veer between over and under assertion perhaps speaks for itself. Isaiah is perceptive, making a daring poetic reversal to encourage beleaguered humanity to look up. People are used to the image of God as royalty, and being encouraged to clear the road for the King, sweep away stones, make the path straight for God to come. In this, passage, though, the way is prepared for the people to come to God. God wants humanity to feel like royalty.

Before that another reversal. Sentinels are up on the walls of Jerusalem. We know what sentinels look like. They are in camouflage, looking bored beside dull green vehicles in European city streets, parked at right angles to look especially purposeful, automatic weapons at that odd angle, finger alongside the trigger. They're looking out for weaponised lorries. Sometimes, given the heat, there is a gazebo for them, "security" printed along the fringe. However sensible, the gazebo takes the edge off the impression of manly watchfulness they want to project. Sentinels also wear high viz jackets and talk incomprehensibly on radios by the horrid steel and concrete barriers in New Street, there to look out for attacks on the German Market. We know about sentinels. Sentinels stare at CCTV in darkened rooms. Sentinels make a massive sacrifice for us, becoming suspicious for our protection at great cost to their emotional and spiritual life, to be sure. We're in a pretty dark place, having so many sentinels. If Herod and military bureaucracy, and the threat of insurgence were burdensome then, they are no less so now even if powers may seem differently configured.

Isaiah's sentinels, though, are never silent because they are reminding the Lord to look after his people. "Take no rest and give him no rest" is the comical order, almost forcing God's hand, but with affectionate hope. They have good news from their lookout position. The prophet has reached a healthy place of hopeful energy, a poetic release from fear and despondency. He strikes a delicate balance, avoiding any false sense of entitlement, but buoyant with confidence in God's promise to come to humanity's aid.

God will bare his arm, they are sure, in a gesture of might and readiness to fight, but the following imagery is tender, not violent: eating and drinking peacefully, everyone admiring the once forlorn city.

So Isaiah begs questions of us. What kind of voice do we raise in the present climate? Should we raise any at all? Is there any place for a language of hope like this? Maybe we're meant to be different sentinels with a hopeful voice to raise.

When Christ came, these visionary poems glittered anew with meaning. He would appear in Jerusalem, but first it is in even more forlorn Bethlehem. Look how bare his arm is when the undefended child was born. See how God has responded to our accusation of absence. Feel what he draws out of the people around him because of the nature of his arrival. His coming begs yet more intense questions of us. Who are we when surrounded by prevailing fears? What is all the jealousy, negativity and clumsy judgement in the air doing to us and our imagination?

By going from the Emperor's census office to the fields around Bethlehem where we meet shepherds, Luke immediately opens up the spectrum of conditions of the human heart. How are they going to react? Relatively unencumbered by usual hierarchies because excluded from them, their response is worth recording first, he feels. Sure enough, their rugged wolf-stalked life belies naivety while their impulsiveness offers an antidote to cynicism; their sense of gratitude is an antidote to entitlement; the energy with which they hurry and delight judges both apathy and fear. Their telling others forges connectivity, community.

Herod, meanwhile, is lost in his differently energising fear which become deadly to those around him. His energy is spent hurrying to crass judgement, espionage, self-preservation, nurturing. Beyond him, the energy of military force hurries around the Empire.

That God should come in this way baring his arm not in military might but vulnerability and dependence, through which he earned the chance to teach, embodies an *interdependence* which he will later call "fullness of life."

Who do you want to be like? Who do you feel draws you with most gravity? Which way is Britain being tugged at the moment, I wonder. Towards the shepherds, in their energetic delight or towards Herod and empire, mirroring the terrorists we fear? Is our *knowing* that of Herod, whose incessant information gathering is fuelled by suspicion, or is it the *knowing compassion* of Joseph and Mary? Do we prefer an objectifying census or the freedom of worship? Are we drawn by the brutality of calculation or the emotional intelligence of gratitude and wonder?

We have a chance of finding that elusive delicate balance, avoiding any false sense of entitlement, but buoyant with confidence in God's promise, when we gather around the child in our imagination. With what do we anchor our humanity: the apparent naivety of a child in the manger or the reassuringly expensive realism of a leaky aircraft carrier? We can despair at cynical harassment or join in the march of a million women. We can strut and shout about terrorists and stoke up racist separatism, or we can walk with the Egyptian Christians and Muslims who accompany each other to worship in defiance of suicide bombers. We can close down in self protection or open up to inter-dependence.

We shall not claim monopoly on realism because we're Christian, but having encountered the Christ child and seen the sign of God's chosen dependence, having met his visitors and been warned of the ugliness of cynicism by his persecutors, we are surely compelled to join those, Christian and otherwise, who prove the power of open-eyed hope, of knowing compassion, of fiercely realistic love. In the first few pages, Luke shows the sight-clearing, heart-leaping, possibility of God coming in Christ to save us. Let's keep reading; let's not rest; let's give God no rest, until all forlorn humanity realises their beauty in the eyes of God.