

Christmas Sermon – setting the centre on the edge

“Christmas sets the centre on the edge.” So begins one of Malcolm Guite’s Christmas sonnets. According to Guite, Christmas puts the focus on “the edge of town, the out-buildings of an inn, the fringe of empire, far from privilege and power.” If this is so, from a human perspective we might say that God makes some rather naïve choices in enacting a plan for the salvation of the world.

Instead of going straight to the heart of earthly authority and putting things straight through a royal decree, or by raising up a famous and powerful superstar, God chooses to re-centre everything, including what we rate and value. The margins become the place where hope springs up.

A young woman, from a tiny, oppressed people group, in the back of beyond, becomes pregnant. The Holy One is birthed – an incredibly risky act in itself for both mother and baby – birthed not in a palace bed, but in a makeshift shelter on the fringes of the nothing town of Bethlehem, because the motel rooms are all booked out. And then the whole family goes on the run, escaping as refugees from a corrupt and tyrannical politician.

No wonder, when the baby grows up, “the world” fails to recognise the presence of God, the true light, in this insignificant, obscure young man. It’s a truth that would have been extremely easy to miss. “The world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.”

God decided that the incarnation, God-with-us, would move the centre to the edge. The one who made the world not only chooses to enter it as a human child, but a child so far from the centre of power and fame it’s a miracle we’ve ever heard of him.

And that's the point. Because when the true light shines, it doesn't matter where it happens – it will grow to fill hearts far beyond what seemed possible in its beginnings. It doesn't matter how insignificant, how marginal the place is where it begins to shine, or how unremarkable the people are who nurture the radiance, the true light changes everything.

Sure, there are lights that seem to shine more brightly to start with – fireworks, floodlights, spotlights, and neon signs proclaiming this or that leader as the one to transform the world. But the light of God is usually something more like a flickering candle to begin with, or a slow dawn. The axis of the world can tilt from anywhere. And in God's economy, that usually means from the place we'd least expect.

So what's with that? Why not work within the grooves of existing influence?

Part of the human condition is that it is difficult, perhaps even impossible, for us to wield power and knowledge without being corrupted into violence and dishonesty. This is part of what our tradition names as "sin" – the reality that our strength often turns to domination, and our learning and technological discoveries are made to serve desires for control or destruction.

And so the way God works in human affairs is to disrupt the established centres of authority and influence – not head on, through conflicts in which the victor simply becomes the new seat of dominance, but from the margins, through the emergence of new and beautiful forms of human community and unlikely leaders who are formed in servanthood and often suffering.

One of my favourite lines from the Lord of the Rings is when Gandalf, referring to sending the defenceless and small Frodo into Mordor to destroy the evil Sauron, says "there never was much hope, just a fool's hope." A fool's hope. It's a phrase we use to describe bad odds. The kind of hope you only cling on to if you're ignorant about the realities of life.

God coming among us as a baby in the back end of Judea was a fool's hope. Our continuing to turn to Christ as the true light of this world is a fool's hope.

But that's okay, even though it feels kind of wobbly, because any other kind of hope is susceptible to human grasping for mastery and control. We keep wanting to take the story back and write it ourselves, with the "proper" people in the important roles and where victory over fear and death comes as the result of a golden fleet of warships. We have to keep accepting over and over, that the kind of hope we tend to *want* is actually a form of certainty that will kill our spirits in the end. And the kind of hope we *need* is a fool's hope, held in open hands, seeking to discern the murmurs of God at the fringes, and in the courage of the vulnerable.

St Paul reminds us of this when he says, "for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing the things that are." (1 Cor 1.25 - 29)

Thus it was when Jesus the Christ came among us. Thus it always is when God is doing a new thing. And whether we see it yet or not, God is always doing a new thing. Now, just as in that first Christmas, God is moving the centre to the edge.

So don't be unduly troubled when world-shaking things seem to be happening in the halls of power and commerce, when you feel like your future is held in the grip of people with more money than wisdom. And if you feel unimportant or insignificant don't let that deceive you into thinking that your choices and your love don't count toward the big picture. They do.

God is shining in the small places. So seek to be influenced not by those with the most power, but those who have been tried by fire and become wise and holy rather than resentful and embittered. Seek the sacred that hovers at the edges, in the waste places, far from influence and might. Light candles in the darkness to make it radiant with small and flickering but warm human light.

And through it all, keep on praising God inspired by the angel chorus and let God show you where the Word is breaking through. Giving ourselves to worship is perhaps one of the most foolish things we can do in a world that tells us we humans are the measure of everything and that the world is what we make it. Worship has become counter-intuitive, even uncomfortable in this disenchanted time.

But turning our hearts and minds to bless and glorify God, and to lift up the whole earth to God in wonder, love and praise, is in fact the most human act we can do. It's what we're designed for. And it's not because God needs pats on the back. It's to enable us to take our eyes off ourselves and our obsessions, our weighing and counting and judging, deciding and ordering – effectively, our sense of responsibility to run the show – and instead lift our eyes to the author of life, the one who was in the beginning, the light shining in the darkness – the one who came to be the fool's hope for the whole world. Amen.

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