

Matthew 2.13-23; Isaiah 63.7-9; Hebrews 2.10-18
December 29th, 2013 (Baptism: James Seago Harold)
St. Andrew's, Totteridge 8:00 a.m. & 10:00 am

May the Lord now be in all our hearts, and upon my lips, that every thought and word may be wholly for the honour and glory of his name.

Welcome everyone to this service of parish communion with an added element; we will gather around the Lord's table to remember how he gave his life for us, but we will also participate in a ceremony of Christian initiation where, as only He can make happen, we are adding to his family. It's a special joy to be able to share with all of you this deeply significant moment in any family's life, here at St. Andrew's, Totteridge.

So with the celebration of the gift of life that is part and parcel of a baptism service, we have an opportunity to welcome James Seago Harold into the Christian community, to give thanks for him as a gift from God, and to thank his parents, Joby & Tory, for bringing him here across the Atlantic; wherewithal, my cup may very well be described to be 'overflowing!'

But at Christmas we celebrate the joy and pain of all birthing: a pain shared by the Word and Wisdom of God taking shape and coming to birth, not only at Bethlehem, but in our lives today. We can feel joy in this birth, but also trepidation at the vulnerability of the divine life among us, as anyone who has held a little baby in their arms would know.

In Jesus we celebrate the union of Word and flesh, God and humanity, spirit and matter, as an everlasting and irrevocable pact – but invariably we struggle to do justice to this unity - to make the gospel a reality in our lives. It's the nativity question again; have we got room in the stable of our hearts for a little baby, a baby that is God himself?

The mystic Meister Eckhart spoke of Christmas as a divine birth in the soul,

Here in time we make holiday because the eternal birth, which the Father bore and bears unceasingly in eternity is now born in time, in human nature. St. Augustine says his birth is always happening. But if it happen not in me what does it profit me? What matters is that it shall happen in me... In this gloom, which is not his own, the heavenly Father's Son is not born alone: thou too art born there a child of the same heavenly Father.

So at Christmas, we have four kinds of time running together: the time, or rather timelessness, of the birthing of the Son of God; the historical time of birth from the womb of Mary in the gloom of the cave or stable; the sacramental time of our birth as God's children at baptism; and the spiritual time of the birth of Christ in the dark depths of the quiet soul, which Eckhart likens to the gloom of Christmas night, perhaps the 'Silent Night' of the Midnight Eucharist.

But it's not all gloom - playfulness, fun and wit can seem lamentably lacking from most faiths, Christianity included. Yet Christmas is redolent with these qualities. The best nativity plays are filled with laughter and joy, but then, at the magic moment, the mirth gives way to a silenced awe that is the essence of Christmas.

But as we all know, Christmas is not just a joyful time – there can even be savagery and pathos in the season too, brought out in scripture in the terrible massacre of the Holy Innocents. In our world, this Christmas, we see the same in the terrible slide into civil war that South Sudan is experiencing; these happenings remind us of the vulnerability of the Christ-child; of all children. Humour quickly turns to that of the clown or fool, who makes us laugh but can also make us weep. Such a combination is like that of innocence – in the Christmas cradle we ponder the innocence of God.

Bearing in mind that Jesus did not tell us to revert to being children, he did ask us to become as little children (Mt. 18.3). But innocence is not a quality we can aim for, more a relationship we fall into that has to do with how we perceive things. In child-like innocence,

We see the stable transformed from a hovel into a kind of radiant paradise, by the innocence-in-relationship that pours from the heart of the Trinity through Jesus who beholds the Father, through his family who behold him, to the shepherds, the wise men, the animals, and all who behold them, to our children, who behold the whole scene in the crib, and finally to us adults, as we behold our children beholding it all.
(Thompson)

All this reminds me of my favourite baptism joke: after the Baptism of his baby brother in church, little Johnny sobbed all the way home in the back seat of the car. His father asked him three times what was wrong. Finally, the boy replied, "That priest said he wanted us brought up in a Christian home, but I want to stay with you."

And so, to gather this all together, the journey to innocence upon which all Christians embark lies in the following of Jesus from the Eden-like cave of Bethlehem, through life and death in the waters of baptism, to the garden of Gethsemane, and that other dark cave, from which, even in death, he arose.

This is the ultimate joy that is the hope of the Christian faith, that we are always loved by the one who made us - who is ever-ready to offer us redemption and life, not just in death but throughout our life. This is the gift of baptismal adoption into the Christian family, an option God brings to James here today.

Prayer: Lord God almighty, thank you that in uniting us with Christ in our baptism, we become one with your worldwide church. Accept our love and praise for this gift that we may continue in faith, rejoice in hope, and abound in love, as servants of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. *Amen.*

For some of the ideas in this sermon I am indebted to a work entitled 'Spirituality in Season: Growing through the Christian Year' by Ross Thompson, published by the Canterbury Press of Norwich in 2008.

Matthew 2.13-23 The Escape to Egypt

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' ¹⁴ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

The Massacre of the Infants

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: ¹⁸ 'A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

The Return from Egypt

¹⁹ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰ 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' ²¹ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²² But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

Isaiah 63.7-9

God's Mercy Remembered

⁷ I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favour to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. ⁸ For he said, 'Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely'; and he became their saviour ⁹ in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Hebrews 2.10-18

¹⁰ It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. ¹¹ For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, ¹² saying, 'I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.' ¹³ And again, 'I will put my trust in him.' And again, 'Here am I and the children whom God has given me.'

¹⁴ Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. ¹⁶ For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

The New Revised Standard Version (Anglicized Edition), copyright 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.