

ON TAKING THE INCARNATION SERIOUSLY¹

A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Second Sunday in Lent, 25 February 2018

We've left behind the niceness of the Nativity and the romance of the Wise Men. We are now about to confront the meaning of the Incarnation. Now is the time to take the Incarnation seriously.

The fourth century theologian and the theological force behind the Nicene Creed, Athanasius of Alexandria, asked why the Incarnation happened as it did. He said:

Some may then ask, why did He not manifest Himself by means of other and nobler parts of creation, and use some nobler instrument, such as sun or moon or stars or fire or air, instead of mere man? The answer is this. The Lord did not come to make a display. He came to heal and to teach suffering men. For one who wanted to make a display the thing would have been just to appear and dazzle the beholders. But for Him Who came to heal and to teach the way was not merely to dwell here, but to put Himself at the disposal of those who needed Him, and to be manifested according as they could bear it ...²

As we shall hear throughout this year, Mark portrays the disciples as continually failing to get the message that Jesus proclaims. As Rowan Williams puts it:

It's many times been remarked that the disciples in St Mark are conspicuously stupid. They repeatedly miss the point; they repeatedly have to have things explained in words of one syllable; ... [I]t is absolutely vital to Mark's story that what Jesus says is hard to digest and to understand even by those closest to him.³

If the disciples fail to understand Jesus, they will continue in their former way of thinking about God, about the Messiah, about the future. This morning's gospel reading starts us on a journey into the difficulty of understanding that Mark spoke of and that Athanasius also reflects.

How often do people under pressure say, "But I was taken out of context"? Context makes a difference. We can't come to a clear understanding of a statement unless we understand when and how it was said. It's the same with our regular Sunday gospel readings. We hear a small snippet of text and must make sense of it. This morning's gospel is no exception. We simply cannot understand it unless we read what went immediately before:

Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that I am?' And they answered him, 'John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.' He asked them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered him, 'You are the Messiah.' And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.⁴

What happened next is this morning's gospel reading. It is a classic example of Jesus' saying about hearing and not understanding, about seeing and not seeing. Both parts of this story depend on Peter. It is Peter who leads the disciples into the recognition that Jesus is the

¹ Readings: Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16; Psalm 22:24-32; Romans 4:13-25; Mark 8:31-38

² Athanasius of Alexandria, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, Chapter 7, section 43
<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/athanasius/incarnation.viii.html>

³ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark*, London, SPCK, 2014, p. 44

⁴ Mark 8: 27-30

Messiah. It is Peter who disputes with Jesus about what being a Messiah means. On the first occasion, Peter is right; on the second, he is dramatically wrong. He is so wrong that Jesus calls him Satan. Some put down! He does this because what Peter said opened the way to violence and bloodshed, to the way of Satan. As Robert Hamilton-Kelly says:

[Peter and the disciples] cannot conceive of any other way of controlling violence than by violence itself; for them, the Messiah cannot be weak. They have entered the heart of the secret of the kingdom, yet at this moment of deepest intimacy they are farthest removed from the truth. The irony of the outside insider is at its most acute. In response, Jesus summons both the disciples and the crowd and teaches the way of the cross (8:34-9:1). The disciples are no longer different from the crowd; they are equally uncomprehending, and equally inclined to be ashamed of the Son of Man and his nonviolent way in this violent generation.⁵

Peter, who was originally called to be a follower, now wants to become the leader. He wants Jesus to follow him in his view of the essence of messiahship. Had Jesus gone along with Peter, his mission was over before it had begun.⁶

Of course, Jesus knew that violence lay ahead. We heard him say that he would undergo great suffering and be killed. It was not the possibility of violence that Jesus rejected. What he rejected was starting it himself.

I do not want in any way to deny the importance of the death and resurrection of Jesus. Those events have stimulated theological speculation and debate ever since they happened. But you cannot have failed to notice that, during his lifetime, Jesus was unfailingly accepting of those who were downtrodden and rejected in his society. His healing miracles were directed not only to those who were sick but to those whose sicknesses made them outcasts; the mentally ill, lepers, those whose illnesses were blamed on their sins or those of their parents. Jesus was notorious for mixing with tax gatherers, sinners and prostitutes. All these were already accepted by Jesus before there was any atoning death. This is the point of the Incarnation, God joining us in our world. This is how we can proclaim ourselves to be the body of Christ still inhabiting that world.

I won't explore any of the consequences of this except to say that, in this respect, the Incarnation is a fundamental affirmation of the value of the creation and, particularly, of human life. Historically, theologians have not had much trouble with the idea of transcendence, of the majesty of the divine, of the unapproachable. What has always troubled them has been the immanent, the appearance of God amongst us, finding God in the unworthy. The problems of the outcasts have not gone away solely on account of Jesus having accepted them. Neither is it the case that Christians have found themselves the only accepting lights in a naughty unaccepting world. We have had the same problem as everyone else.

In general, the ancients of the time of Jesus, apart from the Jews, had little difficulty in accepting gods appearing as humans. Zeus disguised himself as Amphitryon, the husband of Alcmena and fathered the hero, Hercules. Apart from the abuse of power, the important thing here is the disguise. Zeus arranged to appear as a human but still retained his divine powers. The Incarnation was scandalous because it claimed that Jesus, the Son of the Father, was truly human, not simply a disguised deity, hiding his powers but just as likely to take them up again if the mood took him. This was the problem that Arius sought to solve by posing the existence of a half-way Jesus, a Son "made" by the Father. And, to return to Athanasius and the Nicene

⁵ Robert Hamilton-Kelly, *The Gospel and the Sacred*, Fortress Press, 1993, p. 103

⁶ James G Williams (ed.), *The Girard Reader*, NY, Crossroads, 2001, pp. 199-200

Creed, this is why that Creed goes over the top in emphasising that the Son was begotten, not made, denying Arius's central proposition:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.

And, the Nicene Creed goes on to say:

he was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,
and became truly human.

During the enlightenment, the Incarnation came under rationalist fire. Many could no longer accept it. If they rejected everything, they left the Christian faith. Others, however, became Unitarians, denying the Trinity and seeing Jesus as simply a human. This debate still continues.

Do not, therefore, even for one minute, think that it will be easy to take the Incarnation seriously during this Lenten season. Everything argues against it. But, remember, that everything also depends on it. If you want, from a Christian point of view, to assert the equality of women and men; if you want to assert the humanity of refugees; if you want to welcome all people regardless of age, race, sexual orientation, or religion. If, at times, you have found it difficult to believe that the love of God includes you,⁷ then take the Incarnation seriously.

A poem by R S Thomas:

The Coming

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Colour. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows; a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fpt7OmAZYls>

Them. Let me go there, he said.⁸

⁸ R S Thomas, "The Coming", in *Collected Poems: 1945-1990*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2000. P. 234
<http://sacramentalsightings.blogspot.com.au/2013/12/advent-with-poets-coming-by-rs-thomas.html>