

THE SPEAKING DOG – A SIDEWAYS LOOK AT THE INCARNATION!

PREACHER : The Ven Peter Lock, Archdeacon

Sunday, October 11th 2009

Trinity 18

Isaiah 40. 21-31; I John 1. 1-7

3.15am

Rochester Cathedral

O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the new-born Lord,
lying in a manger!
Blessed is the Virgin whose womb
was worthy to bear
Christ the Lord.

Alleluia! (O magnum mysterium)

You might be wondering – why on earth have a Christmas anthem at the beginning of October? No, it's not as if I thought, sneakily, to try and get one over the retail stores who have already started putting up the Christmas decorations. (I know this as my daughter Rebecca works for *bhs* at Aylesford, where I am sure they will be pleased to see you all!). Or even before harvest is over and the cold winds rain which usually come to usher in Remembrance Sunday. That wasn't my reason for choosing this wonderfully evocative and mystical musical description of the birth of Christ, the holy incarnation, by Morten Lauridsen¹. It is because the event of Christ's birth is I believe pivotal to my understanding of how we are to be human, how we are to be together and indeed who God is. It is at the core of the Christian faith. It is God's encounter with humanity; and humanity's encounter with God. Christ's birth and life is a meeting place. No other faith proclaims it quite like this.

It is a mystery and yet it is also revelation. It is something profoundly difficult to explain and yet at heart, when you think of it, it is the most obvious way that God could speak to humanity – which is by coming one of us. This is also beautifully described in John's gospel: The word became flesh and dwelt among us.² The Greek word used for 'dwelling' is 'tent'. And if you've ever lived in a tent you will know its walls are very thin and your next door neighbours will know what you are cooking for breakfast and hear all the conversations you are holding! God becomes very open in dwelling amongst us – as well as we to him.

In one sense the incarnation, God in Christ, is the most blindingly obvious miracle. For how other could God speak to us without becoming human? And yet there are so many things that get in the way that disable us all from seeing it, from comprehending it, perhaps even believing in it.

Let me divert for a second and share with you a shaggy dog story. I hope you'll see in a moment why I'm doing this and how it fits in with what I am attempting to say. It's a sort of sideways look at what I'm trying to say.

Whilst I was for a short time in hospital recently – because there was nothing to do - I managed to read *The Times* newspaper from cover to cover, something I rarely manage to do, when I came across

¹ **Morten Johannes Lauridsen** is an [American composer](#). He was composer-in-residence of the [Los Angeles Master Chorale](#) (1994–2001) and has been a professor of composition at the [University of Southern California Thornton School of Music](#) for more than 30 years. (From Wikipedia)

² John 1.14

a short article entitled *A Shaggy Dog Story*. It tells of the time when someone spotted an advert in a newspaper. The advert read *Talking dog for sale*. The reader was naturally intrigued; after all you don't find many ads for a dog that really speaks. So he went round to the address where the owner lived and knocked on the door. The door opened and someone said – 'Yes, what can I do for you?'

'Well,' said the man, 'I've come about the advertisement regarding your talking dog.'

'Oh right', said the owner with an air of almost resignation. 'He's through there' and pointed to another room. 'Go and say hello'.

Our reader entered cautiously and sure enough there was the dog, lolling lazily in a basket.

'Hello', he said to the dog, feeling rather foolish.

'Hello', replied the dog.

'Oh, you really can talk', said the man, astonished.

'Oh yes,' said the dog. 'I speak in English and am fluent in French and German, quite good at Russian, know a few Scandinavian languages, can get by in conversational Arabic and will have a go at mandarin.'

'Really?' replied the man, impressed.

'Yes, I've also written three best selling novels, composed a symphony, and won awards at the Royal Academy for my paintings. I am a dab hand at the violin, too.'

'That's remarkable', said the man. 'I must just go and confer with your owner. So he went back to the first room and said to the owner:

'This is a truly amazing dog. He really can speak. Why on earth are you selling him?'

'Well,' said the owner, 'because he's such a terrible liar!'³

I suppose you can make of this lovely story what you will. But slumbering on the hospital bed, I thought of this more as a parable. A parable about miracle. For the major miracle was that the dog spoke. And its owner had lost sight of that. Lots of other things had got in the way and messed it up.

I sometimes wonder whether there is so much mess around in the world that we lose track of what is miraculous. It becomes overtaken by bad news, horror stories and what is wrong with the human condition. Now, I don't want to avoid that, because I don't think the story of the incarnation and the life Christ does. Rather it enters right into the world that needs healing and hope, to bring it redemption and new life. His life and witness seems to me to bring together those strands of history in the story of the people of Israel that also show the God who gets involved as the one who brings healing and hope to his people. But there is an awful lot of mess around.

The reading we heard from Isaiah is a marvellous expression of just that. God comes to the harsh realities of the human situation. It's messy and he is going to get his hands dirty. This is the prophetic school which brings us the vision of the suffering servant, not a winged silvery saviour. Probably written, certainly experienced, in the sixth century BC it speaks to a situation of despair with a message of hope. The people were in Exile in Babylon (modern day Iraq). They were in an alien culture. Having lost all that was important to them as far as their faith was concerned (the city of Jerusalem which was meant to have been impregnable as well as the Temple their central focus of their cult worship) they felt deserted and were not afraid to express those feelings to God. 'Where is now your God' is the taunt they hear (echoed and indeed recorded in the Psalms). Yes, where was he, they might be mumbling secretly. And yet it was from that experience that this school of prophecy in

³ *The Times*' 24th or 25th August 2009. I lost the original. This is what I can remember of the story!

Isaiah springs the hope that is eventually realised when they do indeed return to Jerusalem. The point is that the hope came from within the experience of feeling the distance, not the closeness, but the distance of God. There's the mess that eventually gave birth to the miracle: that within the muddle of the human condition, the exiled people discovered a revitalised faith and indeed a deeper faith in their God. The comfort that Isaiah mentions is indeed found in God.

'Jacob, why do you complain; Israel why do you say, 'My lot is hidden from the Lord; my cause goes unheeded from my God'?

Do you not know, have you not heard?

The Lord, the eternal God, creator of the farthest bounds, does not weary or grow faint; his understanding cannot be fathomed.

He gives vigour to the weary, new strength to the exhausted...those who look to the Lord will win new strength, they will soar as on eagles wings; they will run and not feel faint, march on and not grow weary. (Isa. 40. 28-31)

And it is in this section of Isaiah that the mysterious figure of the Suffering Servant is revealed. For Christians down the centuries this has been a pre-figuring of Christ, the one who will suffer and die to show the love of God which knows no bounds as he shows how God is prepared to get into the mess and muddle of this world so that people might live lives redeemed and set free; and continue to be a people of hope; and one's showing forth love to those with whom we share life. If at times the God of the Old Testament seems to be distanced then in Jesus Christ we see God coming close.

I believe that is God's dilemma! It's rather like being a parent with children. If you remain close to them and do everything for them there's the risk they'll: one, never quite grow up; and two resent your intrusion all the time into their lives. Or, if you remain too distant from them: one, you run the risk of not appearing to be interested in them; or two: not being there when they need you. (See 'Kevin' and Harry Enfield's interpretation of the life of a teenager). If it's tricky for parents.....

But in Jesus Christ I believe we see God's closeness to each and everyone of us as he enters humanity in Jesus's life. Here we see the paradox of God becoming human: God's intimate remoteness: his grandeur from afar; his power limited; his love eternal; his closeness in entering death: so that we might rise with him in his resurrection.

That's why the incarnation, the Christmas story is so vital. It is God who speaks. And unlike the shaggy dog story, he speaks the truth as he shows us life and the way we should live. As the gospel of St John puts it so succinctly: Jesus Christ, the way the truth and the life. He is the healer, the redeemer, the perfect peace of God.