

When the Partying Stops

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street, Sydney on Sunday 11 January 2015, by David Gill. The readings were Genesis 1:1-5, Acts 19:1-7 and St Mark 1:4-11.

Christmas is a dangerous time, and I'm not referring to the road toll or what it does to your waistline. I'm talking about what it can do to your faith.

Think about it. What were we celebrating a few weeks ago? What kind of child did we welcome into the world? A very special child, right? A child prophetically foretold, miraculously conceived, angelically hailed. A child spot lit by a star, worshipped by representatives of the world's wisdom, feared by a representative of the world's power.

That birth was unique, unlike any other. I don't know about your arrival in this world, but mine, I am reliably informed, was not greeted by angelic hosts or shepherds in the field abiding. No gold, frankincense and myrrh for the likes of us.

Between Jesus' nativity and ours, between his life and ours, the gap yawns wide. And never wider than at Christmas.

It's not just the birth stories. Think of what his followers have made of the man, through the centuries that followed. In his name we've created vast cathedrals, elaborate rituals, great works of art, fabulous music and profound theological scholarship. We've done lots of other things in his name too, some of them commendable, some not so. Add it all together and what do you have? The message that this man is special, unique, unlike any other.

Which is to say, unlike us.

And there is the problem. The danger of Christmas, indeed of two millennia of popular piety, is it can leave us contemplating a phony saviour who in the end is no saviour at all, an otherworldly figure who fails to connect with the real us and the real world.

Perhaps we've read too many Superman comics, seen too many of his movies. Remember Superman? Mostly he got around as mild-mannered reporter Clark Kent but that, we knew, was just a disguise. When injustice threatened he could whip into the nearest phone box, do a quick change and emerge as the person he really was: a man of steel, armed with superhuman strength and virtue, intent on defending freedom, justice and The American Way.

Some forms of Christianity turn the man of Nazareth into a religious equivalent. Outwardly he is one of us, but that's an illusion, a pretence. He's really a sort of spiritual Superman, wearing human nature as a disguise.

We confront that heresy in the popular fury that erupts whenever novelists like Nikos Kazantzakis, movie directors like Martin Scorsese or painters try to portray Jesus' humanity. Instant outrage! I've mentioned before the storm that erupted in Germany, in the 1920s, when Max Ernst painted "The Blessed Virgin Chastises the Christ Child". It showed Mary spanking her son for some misdemeanour. To make sure everyone got the message, her halo remained in place but his had fallen to the ground. When that picture saw daylight, all hell broke loose. People could not cope with the idea that Jesus might have been a child like other children

But if Jesus only *appears* to be one of us, then the incarnation never happened, the gospel is an illusion and Christians are chasing a lie.

You can see where that kind of Christianity is coming from. The Church has always tried to claim that Jesus is the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, the embodiment of God. No wonder people pull out all those stops and more. But divinity is only half what the Church has wanted to claim for him.

From the beginning Jesus' followers have struggled to affirm not one but two essential things about the child of Bethlehem. That he was truly of God *and* truly one of us. Divine *and* human. But ... how to affirm both?

The Church wrestled with that one for centuries. How to speak of a mystery beyond words? How to say the unsayable? We hear echoes of those early theological struggles whenever we affirm the Nicene Creed.

The tension is there even within the gospel stories themselves. The otherness of Jesus is highlighted. But his "us-ness" is too. Both emphases appear in this morning's account of Jesus' baptism.

Baptism, in those days, was a ritual of cleansing, renewal, preparation for the rule of God. Jesus joins others who respond to the message of John and want to prepare themselves to take part in God's future. He's on the banks of the Jordan, awaiting baptism.

But hold on, we want to say. If Jesus is the son of God, what's he doing here, lining up with the scruffy and wayward masses? If he is all the things they taught us in Sunday School, why does he need to be baptised? John the

Baptiser had exactly that problem. Lord, what are you doing here? I can't baptise you. I'm not worthy even to put on your sandals. You should be baptising me!

Just do it, says Jesus, and John does. Score one for the humanity of the man of Nazareth, as he lines up in solidarity with all the rest of us. But quickly we're told it is solidarity with a difference. Note what happens next.

As Jesus rises from the water, he sees the heavens "torn apart" [it's a strong verb] and the Spirit of God descending on him. And then the voice. "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased". He is of us. He is of God. And then?

With that dual affirmation his life's work is off and running. We didn't hear it this morning, but in Mark's gospel the account of Jesus' baptism is followed immediately by God driving him into the wilderness. Remember those temptations, the options he grapples with, and where that grappling leads him? After forty days of spiritual struggle and heart-searching, he emerges convinced he is called to a life of servanthood. Not a life of power, not a quest for glory, but a journey of self-giving love for God and others.

That's where Jesus' baptism led him. It's where our baptisms in his name should lead us too. Many today still think Christian baptism just bestows a name or marks some kind of religious experience. It does something far more wonderful: it enlists a person, adult or child, in the cosmic revolution of suffering, self-giving love.

Where does all that leave us, now the partying of Christmas is over? Jesus is baptised. His wilderness heart-searching is about to start. Before him will be a life of service, and a cross.

Where does that leave us?

One of Methodism's gifts to the Uniting Church is something called the Covenant Service -- a form of worship sometimes used on special occasions, like a church anniversary or the first Sunday of a new year. The emphasis is self-abandonment to the will of God. It culminates in an awesome Covenant Prayer. The minister and people say together -- or, more likely, try to whisper together -- these words:

*I am no longer my own, but yours.
Put me to what you will,*

*rank me with whom you will;
put me to doing, put me to suffering;
let me be employed for you or laid aside for you;
exalted for you or brought low for you;
let me be full, let me be empty;
let me have all things, let me have nothing;
I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things
to your pleasure and disposal.*

*And now, glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours,
to the glory and praise of your name.*

Then the response:

*We are the body of Christ. **His Spirit is with us.***

Where does it leave us? Right there, as a wonderful community to be, with a wonderful job to do.

A few weeks ago the ABC came up with its Compass Christmas program. I'd expected the usual nine lessons and carols, done with pageantry and choral perfection in some great cathedral. But – shock, horror -- it was not to be. Instead, we were shown Bill Crews' mob at Ashfield Uniting Church turning on a hot lunch for thousands of hungry and lonely people.

A disappointment? Or a necessary reminder of something we tend to forget? Maybe those Compass programmers were right. I'd still like to see Christ's birth celebrated with well-done worship. But surely Bill's cheerful, crowded, chaotic assembly of the broken and needy was what Christmas – everyone's Christmas – should be pointing us towards.

A black American theologian named Howard Thurman was one of the early leaders in the civil rights movement. In 1944, he helped establish the first racially integrated, multicultural church in the United States. Thurman was probably where we are now, in the early days of a new year, when he wrote "The Work of Christmas":

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,*

*When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:*

*To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring Christ among brothers,
To make music in the heart.*

The partying is over. The hangovers are history. The Christmas tree is packed away. Jesus has been baptised. Now the work of Christmas begins. For him. For us too.

Let's go to it.

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