

**Fear not** (Luke 2.1-18)

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'Do not be afraid', the angel says to Joseph (Matt 1.20), and to Mary (Lk 1.30), and to the shepherds (Lk 2.10) – 'Do not be afraid'. 'Fear not' it's a recurring motif in the bible, and here in the gospel accounts of Christmas. Yet if we're taking our cue from the tinsel covered trees, twinkling lights and piped carols in our shopping malls this seems a slightly incongruous Christmas greeting. So what's it about? What was it about the original event in the backblocks of Bethlehem 2000 years ago that so provoked a response of fear?

Well, at one level, the answer is obvious. If I was going about my ordinary life and found myself face-to-face with an angel, with blazing lights and heavenly choirs singing, I reckon I'd be quaking in my boots. It's a strange encounter described here, overwhelming to mind and senses; and not surprising that these characters are shaking. Don't be fooled by those cute little cupids in gift shops (and the homely skit you saw earlier), the poet Rilke was surely more on the mark when he wrote that, '*every angel is terrifying*'.

All the same, I suspect this repeated exhortation to 'fear not' is intended to address more than the startle-ment of those first responders. I think it's there for us as well. I mean, the reality of God – of absolute otherness, absolute holiness and glory – being intimately involved in our world (*our lives!*) is not without risk. Yes, he comes as a Saviour, but even that can be unnerving. '*There is something to be afraid of in the renewal of a world*', writes Rowan Williams (former archbishop of Canterbury). We '*may not welcome being reconstructed or interrupted.*' For all its promise, God's presence will surely impinge on our freedom – make demands and require change. Yes, we're happy for rescue when we're in a fix, for comfort when

feeling lonely or rejected, but to be drawn into a relationship that exposes cherished illusions and selfish ambitions; that's more daunting. Too right, we fear. We fear the evaporation of excuses, a new sense of accountability and possibility. And yet, ultimately the angels assure, there's life here – *'Fear not, I bring you good news of great joy for all people'*.

But hang on, is it really that simple? It's one thing for angels to proclaim the advent of God-with-us, and to encourage us to embrace the recalibration and newness that invites. But with two thousand years of Christianity behind us, it's not necessarily the fear of **God's** disrupting presence that's most imminent. It's fear of religion, of its disruptions that can send a chill up our spine – fear of religious violence, of thought-control, of oppressive (and regressive) social conditioning – these fears can get in the way of even contemplating the possibility of a divine encounter.

The thing is, Saviours gather followers; and some followers become fanatics... terrorists (you see, there's fear in the very name we give them). And, terrorism aside, Saviours start movements, and movements eventually become institutions. And for all their good intentions, a religious institution (like any other) can become self-serving. And whenever this happens it ends up compromising values and endorsing (or concealing) actions that betray its vocation. I'm thinking of the Crusades, and of the psychological trauma and ruin caused by child sexual abuse in the church in more recent times – to name just two. *'Historically, religious faith has too often been the language of the powerful, the excuse for oppression, the alibi for atrocity'*, Williams has noted. *'It has appeared as itself intolerant of difference ... as a self-defensive and often corrupt set of institutions indifferent to basic human welfare.'* And, every time another suicide bombing is reported or scandal uncovered, the suspicion, the fear of religion is confirmed.

‘Don’t be afraid – I bring good news of great joy for all people.’ It may’ve reassured a young pregnant woman and a few terrified shepherds in the first century. But what of a multitude of wary moderns? Why should we not be afraid? What’s here in the Christmas story that offers a different vision of religion? What’s here that might open the possibility of an authentic *and liberating* encounter?

Well, notice what happens in the story. As things unfold it’s increasingly clear that God’s coming to earth is *nothing* like terrorism, the invasion of an occupying army, the first breach in our defences of an all-controlling force. ‘And this shall be the sign’, the angel says, ‘you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger’ (12). And when the shepherds did find that place, that’s what they saw: ‘Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger’ (16). Hardly a threatening scene.

And, that’s the thing – the gentleness of God, the utter and surprising subversion of any notion of divine, or for that matter religious, imperialism. In Jesus, God comes *among* us, comes as one of us; comes as we come – into and from the womb of a mother – a babe in need of feeding... rocking... changing. ‘His batt’ring shots are babish cries, His arrows ... looks of weeping eyes’, Robert Southwell writes, in a poem that wonderfully captures this story’s overthrowing of apprehension. If there is threat in this image, it’s the threat to God that’s most evident, for this child was defenceless... exposed... utterly vulnerable... utterly dependent.

Rather than the perennial religious temptation to impose control and an authorized way of being, from without, God identifies *with* us, dignifies our human condition – from within. Even more incredibly, Jesus shows – in the the living of it – that we humans, though prone to self-interest and capable of some diabolical behaviour, are also capable of *bearing* the very life of God.

And all this gives a very different way of understanding the notion of ‘salvation’. For the fact that this child ‘Saviour’ grew into adulthood, into the fullness of his vocation, suggests the significance of our own human journeys of growth and discovery, doubting, questioning, falling, forgiving, healing. The outworking of salvation takes time, patience, trust. In Jesus’ pattern of impacting the world not by law and threat but by storytelling and service, love and compassion, and ultimately death and resurrection, he reveals the work of divine love to be thoroughly relational *and* deeply respectful of our humanity and world. His way of being with and for us reveals that God is not interested in carving out territory and taking over lives, nor in condescension or condemnation.

Christians need to hear this as much as anyone. Too often it’s people who profess faith that behave as though they’ve not grasped the meaning of Christmas – the vulnerability, solidarity and patience of Christic life. If we want a nervous world to believe there’s nothing to fear in the news we celebrate, to be reassured that what God truly seeks is the flowering of humanity and community, then we must critique our structures and actions whenever they belie Christ’s way of being in the world. And we must prove – by patient loyalty to people in need, by courage and sacrifice for the sake of justice, by labouring for reconciliation and the flourishing of creation – that we, like our Saviour, are *with* and *for* the world.

In truth, the things people mostly fear about religion are the ways it gets co-opted for other purposes – as a justification for prejudice, rivalry, intolerance and self-righteousness. But if the Christmas story sets the tone and pattern, we can be sure these things are not of God.

So, where does this leave us? As I see it, the Christmas season brings us back to a story that critiques selfish, scarcity living in any guise, and that

invites us to participate in making room for the God who comes to be with and for us. Yes, there are challenges here. Christ does ask something of us. He invites us to be more human, more humane – to join him in giving expression to this vision. In a divided and grasping world, prone to violence, this can at times be daunting – it can interrupt old patterns of being and cause us to quail. Yet, ‘fear not’, this is **good** news. News of goodness, for all the world. News of goodness coming into the world. God seeks our best and is fully given over to the realization. Nothing is withheld, all is gift – the gift of Christmas.

#### **Reference**

Williams, R (2013) *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter Sermons from Canterbury Cathedral*, Bloomsbury, London.