

The Feast of Epiphany
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It's rare that the Feast of Epiphany falls on a Sunday. It gives us an opportunity to look back on the Christmas season from the perspective of the light shining from the face of the babe born in the manger. So I want to reflect a bit on just how it is that the event of the Incarnation actually accomplishes the salvation of the world. After all, you just have to look around to see what dire straits the world is in, with wars and famine and ecological disaster; how is it that we can say that this appearance of God in a little child actually accomplishes what we claim for it.

The best way for me to get at this, I think, is to lift up our annual Christmas Pageant. It is in every way a remarkable event, full of kids, under-rehearsed and sometimes un-rehearsed, in every variety of role and costume. This year we saw a group of high and middle-schoolers who growing up with our pageant have so internalized the story that they were able to direct younger groups of angels, or shepherds, or sheep and other barnyard animals. It becomes, every year, a way from our kids to participate in the Incarnation, to somehow take a part in the project by which God is saving the world, and so to learn how to continue to be a part of that effort of which God is the Protagonist.

My favorite moment this year was the walk-on part played by Jack who two years ago was the baby Jesus. This year he was too old for that and too young for a costumed role so he just showed up in his red sweatshirt, contrasting perfectly as he wandered among the white satin clad angels. He visited first his sister, then his brother, occasionally turning to face the congregation as if posing for a picture. He was so at home, as if he were still Jesus, hanging out in heaven, just schmoozing with the angels. And then there was his older sister who was just perfect as King Herod . . . in red spike heels, no less, now warmly hospitable to the three wise guys, now the cold-hearted villain demanding that the innocent children of Bethlehem be killed.

Herod is a stock villain in this story. Known to history as Herod the "Great" or Herod the "Builder" because of his many building projects including the Temple in Jerusalem, he was as brutal a despot as they come. Probably enslaving people for their labor, he's the new Pharaoh in Matthew's account just as Jesus is the new Moses saved from the infanticide of the ruler who kills all the newborns in Bethlehem to make sure this upstart Messiah doesn't come to power. He's kind of like Haman, the villain from the Book of Esther, a version of which is read every year at Purim Parties in the Jewish community. Whenever the audience hears his name in the reading of the story, they hiss. That's how the first hearers of Matthew would have received the introduction of Herod.

In 1948, while England was still plunged deep in post-war darkness, the Poet W.H. Auden published a long poem called "Christmas Oratorio" or "For the Time Being." It begins looking back at the holiday:

"Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree. Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes --"

He gets us in touch with the feelings of this after Christmas time. And he also lifts up our common experience of connecting with the Incarnation itself, that thing that comes to us from outside of time and the way in which we seem to pack it away like the ornaments until next year.

Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again . . .

The Christmas Feast is already a fading memory,
And already the mind begins to be vaguely aware
Of the unpleasant whiff of apprehension at the thought
Of Lent and Good Friday . . .

In order to return to our normal lives,

We had forgotten
The office was as depressing as this. To those who have seen
The Child, however dimly, however incredulously,
The Time Being is, in a sense, the most trying time of all.

For it is the very experience, that causes us to “repress” the vision, “to inhibit/Our self-reflection” and seek instead some obsessive distraction, the fear of “some great suffering,” that will come

with a force
More dreadful than we can imagine. In the meantime
There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance.

What Auden is really up to becomes clear in a section where he “listens-in” on King Herod’s inner dialogue about whether or not to kill the innocent children of Bethlehem to stop the reign of this rival Messiah. He poses for us a choice. It is the polarity that we see illustrated in our own political discourse and in our cultural life today. Herod ruminates that not only will his reign end, but if this baby is allowed to mature . . .

Reason will be replaced by Revelation
Justice will be replaced by Pity as the cardinal virtue,
And all fear of retribution will vanish . . .
The New Aristocracy will consist exclusively
Of hermits, bums and permanent invalids.
The Rough Diamond and the Consumptive Whore,
The bandit who is good to his mother,
The epileptic girl who has a way with animals
Will be the heroes and heroines of the New Age,
When the general, the statesman, and the philosopher
Have become the butt of every farce and satire.

So if Herod doesn't stamp out the Christ, he says to himself, the world of reason and might will fall to the leap of faith and a new status for victims. But whatever Auden may have meant by this remarkably prophetic passage, it is a false dilemma. Herod poses a false choice.

The Incarnation calls us neither to the rationalist exercise of power as the solution to the apparent reign of death in our world nor to an uncritical faith, a fideism, or faith in faith. Rather by a simple letting go into the Grace represented by the radiance in a child's face, a relaxing into and participating with the Protagonism that is the continuing creation, like little Jack wandering among the angels at the Christmas pageant, we can begin to shine with that same radiance into the darkness of our world. For the Time Being is the time to find the radiance of Christ in all persons by means of love and forgiveness. It is the time to connect with the Saints and the Angels wherever we may wander. That is how God by the Incarnation saves the world.