

Sermon Notes for Christmas

“and the light shineth in darkness.” (John 1).

Christmas functions, I suspect, as a way of finding us out. Not in whether we go to church or not. Nor in such obvious sins as gluttony (while it is a sin to “fare sumptuously every day” and neglect the needy, it is not a sin to rejoice in the Son of Man who “came eating and drinking” one day in the year). No, it may (and you will know the truth) find us out in much clearer sins such as anger, pride and covetousness, or indeed in the dog-in-the-manger refusal to rejoice with them that rejoice. But also it may find us out performing a kindness, a generosity that we did not think we had in us, for there are seven virtues as well as seven deadly sins. We should examine ourselves concerning our sin, but the Lord will reward us concerning our virtue whether we notice it or not.

Christmas finds us out, and that is what John is getting at in his own way. Now I assume (like many scholars) that he knew the nativity stories in Matthew and Luke and, more important, appreciated much more easily than we can what truths the authors were conveying through them. He knew, but saw no point in following their approach again. Instead, he would convey the meaning of the Lord's Coming not by stories but by imagery. Both approaches are theological!

The main image (in all the Gospel and in the First Epistle) is that of light, and therefore of its opposite, darkness. There is, for John, no intermediate twilight. The world's sophistication delights in shades of grey; but the coming of Christ dissolves them into black and white.

Now John sets the image up by a commentary on the beginning of Genesis. If you read it alertly, God's first Word, hurled against chaos, is “Let there be light”; so when the Word of God comes into the world, naturally “in him was light”. In Genesis we next read “And God divided the light and the darkness”. So Jesus from the moment of his coming is light and so creates division (a truth well known to the other gospels – “not peace but a sword”). It is of the nature of light, moreover, to show things up - to reveal to ourselves our secret faults. “And this is the judgement, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their works were evil” (John 3.19). It is not for us to judge others. It is for us to be “children of light” (John 12.36), and so when “the light shineth in darkness” we do not reject it and hide, but prefer to come, however fearfully, to face Christ's judgement.

St. John finds the coming of the Lord deeply ironical. After all, God made the world and set up the light in the first place, and the darkness had never been able to overwhelm it (“comprehend” no longer conveys the meaning of the Greek). The coming of the Lord which we remember today is to give the world he made in the first place a chance to return to its true relationship with him, not by external advice, but by coming into it Himself. And what happens? “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not” (chose not to recognise its Maker, that very original Word). “He came unto his own, and his own received him not” (this is presumably the Jewish people as a generalisation, specially enabled to keep some awareness of God and yet for the most part rejecting Him when present among them).

To that extent, the chance was offered and rejected. But it is not all bad news. “But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name”. We are among that small group who have accepted the chance to live our lives in the light. For us, if Christmas is a time of judgement, it is also a time of hope. For that Word who is the light has “dwelt among us” - has, to draw out the Greek, erected the holy Tent of Meeting among us. Through him, the Word made flesh of our flesh, we are back in the true relationship with the Father, and so can (but largely not this year) join together effectively in worship. Thank God, the Tent of Meeting is not a sacred building (which we have not got now on earth and certainly will not have in heaven) but the Lamb of God.