

Luke 2:1-20

24.12.17 (Christmas Eve)

Registered

During the past year our church here has had quite a focus upon refugees. We helped organise a couple of football tournaments, and a swap-shop for clothing, and there have been some other initiatives – and we have been blessed to have some refugees worshipping with us week by week. Maybe that is why this year, in reading the Christmas story from Luke's Gospel, the word that leapt out to me was 'registered'. 'In those days a decree went out from the Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.' Through our work with refugees we learned a bit about the Dublin Regulation which establishes a Europe-wide fingerprinting base for unauthorised entrants into the European Union, and which determines which European member state is responsible for an asylum claim. It's all part of the procedure for registering. And so Mary and Joseph, not yet technically refugees – that will come later – set off on the journey to Bethlehem where Joseph's ancestors were from and therefore where he must be 'registered'.

It's a little peek into the bureaucracy of the Roman Empire. Registration of course means control. When I arrived here three years ago I had to register and receive my BSN number because that's the way the state keep tabs on people, and it was the way Romans controlled their empire. I can't help wondering if somewhere there existed some great Roman filing system and on some card somewhere, filed under J, was Jesus, son of Joseph, descended from the house and family of David. And when Jesus was arrested and tried, was some Roman bureaucrat checking through the files, scrutinising Jesus' entry for information? Nowadays it would be computers and fingerprints or maybe cameras and retina matches, but whatever the technology the aim is registration – and registration is all about control, and empires and powers and states need control.

Which is why there is something so absurd, so ridiculous about Jesus being registered. As a Christian I believe that in Jesus we meet God: that God was supremely in Jesus, that in him God was entering our world, that in Jesus we have to do with God uniquely and supremely. And in this registration of Joseph and his family, would we therefore try to control God, to name God and to file God away, securing him in a bureaucratic cage? After all, when you read

about the person Jesus became one thing that stands out is the sheer impossibility of controlling him. He is wonderfully – infuriatingly - elusive and free. People try to define him, religious leaders try to trap him, enemies try to ensnare him, but he evades everyone’s grasp. Like the Holy Spirit that inhabits him, he blows where he wills, leaving all who attempt to constrain him or to co-opt him clutching at thin air. The only way to pin Jesus down is to – well, pin him down. With nails. But every tomb or system or cage we construct to imprison him, he breaks out of.

Yet, if God in Christ resists our control, nevertheless God does limit himself, scaling himself down to our size. This is the extraordinary thing about the God of Jesus Christ: He places himself in our hands. He becomes bone of our bone, flesh of our flesh. He walks among us with a human face. And in so doing God does not become subject to our control, but God does become approachable, accessible. Yes, in Christ God remains majestically elusive – but he does put himself within reach. In Christ God comes to us and becomes available, present. And this is what Christmas is all about, what we call the incarnation, where we find God, in Christ, lying small and vulnerable in a manger. Of course, God remains beyond us, beyond time, beyond the universe, beyond being. God is mystery and always will be to us finite, earthbound and time-framed humans. And too much of the religious fundamentalism that is such a scourge of our world is a denial of mystery, a belittling of God. But calling God mystery can be a cop-out. It can become an excuse for keeping God at arm’s length. One way of handling mystery is to leave it well alone, to say simply, ‘it’s all beyond us.’ This God, however, does not leave us that option. In Christ God registers with us. In that little baby God comes down to us, reaching out to us, calling us into the relationship with him for which we have been created. As the great, early Christian hymn from which we quoted earlier puts it.

‘he emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness;
and being found in human form...’

Or, as the beautiful carol which we will sing in a moment puts it,

‘Lo! Within a manger lies,
He who built the starry skies...’

Or as the great hymnwriter, Charles Wesley put it, ‘God contracted to a span, incomprehensibly made man.’ That’s beautiful: the infinite, free God, contracted, limited - registered.

It’s all mystery, of course. We cannot fathom it – it’s beyond us. Yet at its heart the truth is simple enough, the truth we celebrate tonight: God has come down to our level, given himself over to us, registered with us. Christmas invites a response. It’s a time for us to sign on with God, to register with the Kingdom of his Christ, to whom be praise and glory forever. Amen.