

## Smouldering Wicks

22 December, 2013

Scripture lesson: Isaiah 42:1-4

One of the most unusual Christmas prophecies is to be found in Isaiah 42:1-4 . One of the lines particularly resonates for a Christmas candlelight service: “He will not snuff out a smouldering wick”, or sometimes translated “a flickering lamp”. The general point of the passage is that the coming Messiah will accomplish his mission of justice without force or violence; he’s not a Che Guevara coming to lead a guerilla movement, but will instead work in love and humility. But we are each invited to make the Christmas story, and the Christmas prophecies, our own story, not just something back there in history, or something out there in society – and thus there is a particular sense in which we may reflect upon ourselves as “smouldering wicks”.

All of us who have reached adulthood are, I think, aware of a sense of loss when we reflect on Christmas past – the loss of something of family, community, church or ideals that we remember from our childhood, or even perhaps from our own children’s childhood. Perhaps we are much older now, and no longer have a family left to gather around dinner table and tree; perhaps our families are around their own tables and trees now. Perhaps we are just old enough to be going out on our own, and no longer returning to a family Christmas. Perhaps as communities have changed customs like carolling have died out, or we have moved far from our roots to where there are other customs. As communications advance, Christmas everywhere seems to be ever more about buying and giving, not fellowship and doing for one another. At the very least, artificial Christmas trees don’t smell like the real ones. From the time I was an adolescent I’ve never been able to see why one should cut down a tree to celebrate the birth of Jesus, but still, despite that, the smell of the tree is nostalgic.

Not that all the changes are bad: artificial trees don’t shed like the real ones either. And many of the changes are simply part of growing up or ageing: we move on, find new friends and new interests. Perhaps we even find new ‘gods’ to devote our lives to, and the faith in which we were raised becomes less important than new beliefs and practices – some intellectual, as we are exposed to new ideas; others materialistic, as it seems we work harder and longer to maintain ourselves in the style which we have gotten used to. Sometimes we just get too involved in other things, and our faith and practice slip away.

And perhaps, honestly, too, sometimes the church withdrew as well, became colder, lost its energy; perhaps it didn't have the commitment to try to understand what was happening with us and try to stay in touch. Sometimes we have been confronted with things about the church which we did not know or see when younger – its racism, its homophobia, its materialism, its Babylonian captivity to nationalism, its embrace of militarism and violence, and we've given up on or rejected the whole lot. Or perhaps we have met with defeats and reversals in life, reverses that have just about snuffed out our faith and hope. And somehow, all of these losses and dissatisfactions come more into focus this season.

But at the same time, we discover in this season just how hollow our new gods are as well; somehow, none of our new beliefs satisfy like the memories do. The consumer culture in which we sit never looks quite as tawdry as it does around Christmas. I swear, if I hear one more automated Santa belting out the Jingle Bell Rock, I'm going and getting my Uzi! (OK, I know, that's not exactly how Isaiah says the Messiah will work...) It's in this season that we are also aware of how empty our lives may have become, as we rattle around in the face of the forced mirth of the season. It is precisely now that we are aware of how much of a smouldering wick we have become, how dimly our fire is burning.

It is now that we can best hear Isaiah's promise: that Christ will not despise or reject us in our lost state, our combination of exile and wandering. Indeed, that is why he has come, and come as he did, as a baby at Bethlehem, in the manger rude. For God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself – reaching out into the midst of our world to seek us when we could not or would not find our own way back. From the very moment of his birth, homeless, a wanderer, this Christ lived in such a way that in Him God took to himself and knew the full extent of human pain and emptiness: wept for it, healed it, finally redeemed it. None of the flickering lamps that Jesus met – Matthew the tax collector, Nathaniel the cynic, Zacchaeus the sharp financial operator, Nicodemus, the man in the dark, Mary Magdalene – none were rejected, turned away to have the little light that they had left flicker out alone. It is the same today. God recognizes the plight and pathos of our lives, comes gently, without coercion, to welcome us back.

He asks only that we be ready to invite him in, to recommit ourselves to his kingdom – to rekindle the flame that is sputtering out, that it may first light our lives, and then perhaps the world around us. And our light, no matter how small, has that potential. There is the pulpit story of the lighthouse keeper who took up a candle and lit it. "Where are we going?" asked the candle. "Up in the tower." "And what will we do there?" "Your light will guide

ships far out at sea.” “But I am too small,” said the candle.” “We shall see.” When used to light the lamp in the centre of the reflectors, the little candle’s light did indeed reach far out. Even so, our light, taken up and magnified by God’s grace and power, may reach afar. God asks only that we allow our light to be rekindled by him.

I don’t think that there have been many Christmases within my memory when I have been so despairing about the state of affairs in the world – the terrible, unending suffering from the proxy war in Syria; Israeli arrogance and American imperialism; the state of the environment, the state of the world economy, the general denial of human rights in the first, second and third world alike, the suffering in the sideshows like Somalia, and the Congo, the captivity of the Church with which I identify, and of religion in general, with the worst and most anti-human theologies and powers – and my inability to do anything about the behaviour of the church, about the conditions in distant lands, about the massive trends surging toward disaster. Indeed, I question whether any individuals, even those who were the effective agents of starting some of these disasters, could recall or alter their course. That is why the Bible calls them “principalities and powers”; they are superhuman entities that take on an identity and reality of their own. What use is my light in the battle against them? None. But that is the wrong question: we ought to be asking what use our light is in our immediate circumstances, our families, among our friends and colleagues, in our communities. Enough small lights together can dispel darkness and may have effects which we can never suspect.

That same light of God, when it becomes our own light, also allows us to see where we are going, and to meet the future with confidence. My Christmas verse contribution from W.H. Auden this year – his work is a treasury of Christmas verse – is his admonition:

Remember the gift,  
the one from the manger;  
It means only this,  
you can dance with a stranger.”

With the light we carry with us we have not only the light to meet, to encounter the new in life, and the stranger, be he or she a stranger to us ethnically, or in religion, or sexual orientation, or with an unimaginably lower standard of living, but indeed, should they have the confidence to meet us, to dance with the new, the uncertain, the stranger.

To bear this light of Christ in our lives, we need only make ourselves available. As we light our candles in a moment, perhaps it may be for you a symbol of your desire to no longer be a smouldering wick, but to strive to gain, or regain, the bright flame of faith. If that desire is yours, know that indeed Christ comes not to snuff out the smouldering wick, but to return it to brightness.