

Midnight Mass: St Thomas on The Bourne 2023

'Greetings favoured one. The Lord is with you...' Luke 1, 28

The town of Albert lies on the Somme in France. In the First World War it was the scene of heavy bombardment, and its great basilica was reduced to rubble...except for a huge golden statue of the Virgin Mary and the child Jesus at the very top of the shattered dome. That statue had been dislodged from its plinth during the shelling, but somehow or other, it was still there... but instead of lifting their hands heavenward, Mary and the child Jesus were now leaning out from the devastated tower at a 90-degree angle... shifted from the vertical to the horizontal.

The statue became the object of much speculation. Some claimed that the war would end when the statue fell; others said that whoever shot it down would lose the war. Yet others claimed that the Virgin's attitude was one of absolute despair in which she was about to throw her child into the horrors of the battle; others said she was offering her son to God as a sacrifice. Another story was that the statue was a message to the soldiers because like them, the child was in danger, and Mary was reaching out over the town to comfort everyone. And yet others said that Mary and the Christ child were prostrated by grief at the slaughter taking place in the trenches nearby.

So, one statue but many stories, each of them marked by pathos and hope.

Transfer your minds from that leaning statue and towards the stories about Jesus of Nazareth

Like the stories about the statue, the narratives that surrounded Jesus throughout his life were extraordinarily diverse. Descriptions of who he was varied: some said he was a healer, others that he was a man possessed; some said he was the Son of God, others said he was the Son of Man; some said he was a prophet, others said he was a King. If people alive at the time found it difficult to define who he was, is it any wonder that 2000 years later the questioning still goes on?

One of the important ways of interpreting him during the last 2,000 years, has been to say that he was a revelation, an epiphany... as the carol says, 'he came down to earth from heaven' and by doing so revealed who God truly was.

But that leaves our generation with a problem because we struggle with the very idea of revelation, and so we find it difficult to make sense of a faith that lays such emphasis upon it. This is not a criticism, we (and I include myself) are inevitably children of our age, we are shaped by the thought processes of our culture, we think in categories that are literally common-place, and therefore, the idea of 'revelation' is one which we question. To slightly misrepresent Laplace... we have no need of that hypothesis. As Alexander Pope stated with such forceful clarity in the early 18th century: 'the proper study of mankind is man'. And ever since, the idea of divine revelation has been pushed more and more into a corner. Add to that the work of Freud in the 20th century, and the more recent fascinating work of neuroscientists on the nature of the brain and consciousness, and the result is that the

concept of revelation is not just pushed into a corner but is beginning to disappear altogether.

But I now want to return to the stories of that statue on the basilica...

None of the stories could claim to be the only legitimate one...none of them were definitive. Those stories, in all their variety, were entirely the result of human imagination and thinking, but...but...did they not have something of the character of 'revelation' about them? That is, each of them was trying to express a fragment of what felt like a greater and deeper truth... that the statue somehow revealed that God was present at the very centre of the suffering and yearned to bring solace and peace.

At one level, of course, the statue was just a lump of metal, but at another level, according to the story tellers, even in its precarious and battered state, it carried messages of divine meaning and hope.

So, a question: was that just wishful thinking, or might there be something important in the idea of revelation after all?

Let me try to answer the question by offering some further questions: have you not had the experience of holding a little baby in your arms and then found yourself silenced by the sheer wonder of it? Have you not been on a beach and have felt suddenly overwhelmed by the ineffable mystery of it all? Have you not heard a piece of music which has left you speechless, but aching with joy? Have you not experienced a human love which has left you transported with sublime and indescribable happiness?

Perhaps 'revelation' is a good word to describe those experiences. But let's be honest: for some, those experiences will carry **human** signals of meaning and hope. Yet for others, but not all, those experiences reveal something about the nature of God.

And so it is, on this most holy night: for some, the child lying in a manger is primarily about **human** hope and **human** meaning, and for others, that same child is about the deep, mysterious character of God... and God's self-emptying love for us.

It leaves us with a choice about what we believe... but only in the depths of our souls will we know which of those interpretations we should choose to guide our lives into the future.

So: was the child in the manger a revelation of God or not? I commend the question to you.

The Rt Revd Dr Christopher Herbert