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SERMONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN YEAR

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5th December: Advent 2

EITHER OR?

By the Revd Rick Brand
Henderson, NC, USA

Isaiah 11:1–10; Matthew 3:1–12

What is it that shapes our lives? What is this restlessness inside of us wanting? What is it that will make us happy? What is on your Christmas list? What is it that you think you need to have to be content? Some say that our peace, our contentment, is found in what we have. That our lives are shaped and determined by what we possess. That is why social scientists suggest that those who do not have certain things act differently. That is the great message of Santa Claus, our happiness, our delight, our greatest joy, can be found in something material, some kind of present. Others say that our lives are shaped by those we know, by those we love, and who love us. That is why it is suggested that children from broken homes, single parent homes, sometimes find it difficult to fit in. Their lives are shaped by those who do and do not love them. This suggests that the real joy of Christmas, the real blessing of Christmas, is in the happiness that comes in giving to those we love that which fulfills their dreams. That the great power of Christmas is found in that satisfaction which comes in seeing the faces of our loved ones filled with surprise and joy at our gifts. Our true transformation comes in learning, what God knew, that the desire of love is to give to the beloved, that is why God gives to us his son.

The Scriptures we read this morning seem to push us even beyond the joy that comes in giving to our beloved by suggesting that what really shapes and determines our lives is what we are waiting for. What is the vision that we hope will come true? What is the shape of the brass ring we want to grasp? What is the picture of paradise we await? Ian and Sylvia, a Canadian folk duo in the 1960s, had a song about the painful pilgrimage to paradise. They sang 'Some people speak of pastures where the milk and honey flows, But I have no such illusions of the place I want to go.' But what is the vision of paradise that keeps you looking to the future? Is it part of the Biblical understanding of who we are that our lives are shaped and directed and guided by that for which we long?

And Advent is a good time to talk about that vision, for Advent means 'coming' and the promise of Advent is that something is coming. We are waiting for something to come. We are preparing, marking time, looking forward to the day. We talk about the coming of Christ at Christmas time and speak of the coming of Christ at the end of time in glorious majesty. Christ coming as child; Christ coming as King. The power of Advent to shape our lives depends upon what we think we are waiting for.

Frederick Buechner, the Christian novelist, suggests that what we are waiting for at Advent is an invasion of holiness. That is what Advent is about, our waiting for the coming of the glory of God, the power of His Will, the light of his love in our lives. Advent is the waiting for the invasion into history of the holiness of God.

But look at the way this longing for the coming of the Holiness of God has shaped these two passages. One almost gets the feeling that we are part of that George Carlin routine which describes the difference between the peaceful and lovely game of baseball and the military and macho game of American football. Baseball is played in a field, football on a gridiron. The goal of baseball is to go home. The goal of football is to get into the End zone. Baseball you can make a sacrifice. Football you throw the bomb. Here in this morning's scripture are two visions of the coming of the Holiness of God. Isaiah speaks of the coming of the servant of God who will bring in the new kingdom of God's holiness on earth and it will be what we have called the peaceable

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kingdom. Matthew has John the Baptist speaking of the one who is to come who will bring in the Holiness of God and it will be cutting, chopping, fire and judgment.

We turn to Isaiah's picture of the coming of the Holiness of God and we begin to hear string music. In the background there is Vivaldi's lovely music of spring. The images begin to reflect a new power of life. The old dead bushes begin to send up fresh young shoots. The old trees now have a new life. A gentle and kind leader will have great wisdom and serenity and judgments will be made lovingly and appropriately. A kind and gentle word, and evil will wither. A look of disappointment and regret, and hostility will melt. This will be the kind of community Rodney King asked for, 'Why can't we all just get along?' All of us will be living together in a harmonious whole. This will be the place where all creation lives in peace. There will be no three year old boys mauled by exotic tigers kept in a cage. The old curse between humanity and the snake will be removed and the child and the asp will live together. You can add your own picture of a gentle moving mountain stream, you can decorate it with a magnificent sunset on the lake. You start with Isaiah's peaceable kingdom and the Jews and the Arabs live together better than brothers. It is the kind of paradise where HIV does not kill innocent babies. That is the way Isaiah sees this coming of holiness. The way George Carlin describes baseball. That is the vision that shapes his life and his hopes, the coming of the restoration of peace and gentleness, a little child can be made the leader because innocence and trust will not be abused. The man who built the George Washington Bridge in New York City, multiplied his numbers by four because he knew his bridge would be built by politicians whom he figured would cut corners, and participate in fraud. When the holiness comes even a naïve little child can be given the power to rule for there will be no guile or evil.

But John the Baptist is shaped by a different vision of the coming of that holiness. When that Holiness comes in all of its glory and righteousness, all that is evil must be punished. All that is corrupt and worthless and evil has to be destroyed. Here is a vision of the coming of Holiness which fuelled Michelangelo's Last Judgment in which there is the herding of human beings into the Pit of everlasting fire. The emphasis on terror produces a terrifying picture of God, who works by fear. Evil being destroyed is something we are encouraged to long for. In Matthew the coming of holiness will come as a sudden, decisive moment in time. There will be the winnowing, and the sorting out, the unworthy will be chopped down, and cast into a fire. And John is not even very happy that there are some who have come out to hear his talking about this because they might repent and be excused from the judgment. 'You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee the wrath that is to come?' When the holiness of God comes it will come as a liberation army, crushing the forces of darkness and then the court which will sentence the evil to everlasting judgment. John the Baptist has the coming of Holiness with all the images and power that George Carlin talks about football.

As we come into this Advent season, what is the vision of the coming of the Holiness of God that shapes your life? When the Holiness of the Kingdom of God comes, Mortal one, which will it be, string music or military band? Either or? Both? Both . . .

A group of American Christians went on a mission trip to South America. They had been prepared for the conditions they were going to be working in, but no amount of talking can prepare you emotionally for what they found. Children being buried every day. Hunger. Political oppression and cruelty. Within a couple of days they had all lost their enthusiasm and interest in even trying to help. What was the use? Anything they did would be destroyed by the next day.

One of the Christian leaders of that community talked with them. 'You Americans, you only know how to think about things in terms of winning. You always want to think about being able to say how much good you did. So you look at our lives and do not know how to carry on. And yet when you look into our faces you are amazed to see the faces of hope. Hope, not because we are winning, we've been losing all of our lives. These are our children we are burying. These are our stomachs that are empty, our necks that live with the heavy boot of political oppression upon them. But when you look into our faces, you will always see faces of hope. We are hopeful not because we can do anything. We are hopeful because we are convinced that we are trying to be faithful to what God is inviting us to do in the situation where we are, and because of that we have hope that when the victory comes, it will be ours. It may come tomorrow. It may come in three hundred years. But when it comes it will be ours.'

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Advent is a time of waiting for the coming of the holiness of God into history. What we think that Holiness of God will look like will shape the way we live. Surely there is a great hope that all creation will be restored to God's intention, surely there is part of most of us that would delight to see evil crushed, God take his revenge, but as we live in these Advent days, our hope, the smiles on our faces, is that when the victory comes, whenever it comes, today, tomorrow, at death, in the second coming, we may be a part of all those who celebrate it coming. Not even that the victory will be ours, but that we will be His when it comes.

12th December: Advent 3

By the Revd Allan MacCafferty
Kirkwall, Orkney

Matthew 11:2–11

Recently there has been a run of feature films that have been based on novels. For example many children (and some adults) have enjoyed going to the cinema to see the third in the Harry Potter series: *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*.

Sometimes watching a film will lead people on to buy the book. However if you have read the book first, and see the film later, it's always interesting to compare the two. Will the image on the big screen compare faithfully to your understanding or interpretation of the book? How closely does the film relate to the book? What is included and what is missed out? Sometimes things are easier to portray on screen, sometimes things are much easier to portray using words on a page.

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is another 'blockbuster'. I have had a copy of the *Lord of the Rings* sitting on my bookshelf for years. Many of my friends read it while at school, and I've always been meaning to read it, but the knowledge of the film trilogy coming along was enough impetus to make me take time to sit down and read it. I wanted to read first, watch later! I found it a rich book, very descriptive and yet with a strong story line also.

In the books, of the Harry Potter series and the *Lord of the Rings*, there is a certain amount of explanation required throughout. This is particularly needed because you are entering a world that is different from the real world we inhabit.

The author has to work at creating a sphere that our minds can imagine and enter into.

In a sense, there is no right or wrong about the way we picture it in our heads, because it is a fantasy world, crafted by the author, written down, and then interpreted by us as we try to picture each scene.

On the other hand if books are set in the real world, the world in which we live day by day, then the author can get away with describing things less vividly, not because (s)he is not able to, but because there is no need to.

Imagine you belong to the congregation of a grand, famous church such as St Giles' Cathedral in Edinburgh. If you read the sentence, 'The child stood looking up at the pipe organ in St Giles' Cathedral', you would instantly have a picture in your head. Either of a child standing looking up at the organ, or maybe even the child's eye view; particularly if you have physically stood in such a position and looked up at the organ yourself at some time in the past. However (remembering you are a part of the congregation of St Giles' Cathedral) if I substituted for St Giles, St Magnus Cathedral (in Orkney) or Brechin Cathedral, probably fewer of you would have a clear picture in your head. What makes sense to us, partially relates to what we know, the knowledge we bring to the story that is being read.

A couple of years ago I enjoyed reading a book called *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier, which also has been made into a movie. It's set in America, a soldier is wounded in the civil war and he turns his back on the carnage of the battlefield and journeys home to Cold Mountain and to Ada, the woman he loved before the war began. I felt that it was beautifully descriptive writing, but when the soldier came to talk about the trees and plants on the journey home, my botany was simply not good enough. I could manage some of it, but certainly not it all.

> 'Pumpkins and winter squash lay bright on the ground between the corn rows. Goldenrod and joe-pye weed and snakeroot blossomed tall along the fence rails, and the leaves on the blackberry canes and dogwarts were maroon.' (p. 172)

My lack of knowledge meant I couldn't quite see as clearly as I could have done had I known what all the plants were.

In our gospel reading today something similar is going on. John the Baptist is in prison. He always spoke very honestly and directly. Herod Antipas of

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Galilee has seduced his brother's wife, indeed he ended up dismissing his own wife and marrying his sister-in-law by luring her away from her husband. In public John rebuked Herod. Herod had him, according to Josephus, imprisoned in the fortress of Machaerus in the mountains near the Dead Sea. Indeed later in chapter 14 of Matthew's gospel we read that Herod would have preferred to have him killed, but held back because he knew many of the people took John to be a prophet. This must have been terrible for John who was so used to living in open spaces, in the desert with the wind in his face and the sky all around him. John is almost cut off, unaware of the day-to-day developments outside in the 'real world'.

Remember earlier in the gospels John is preparing the way for the Messiah, preaching in the desert, saying that people should repent and turn back to God, but his emphasis was quite solidly on judgment. He said, 'every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire' (Matt 3:10), also when talking about the messiah he said, 'he will gather the wheat into his granary but the chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire' (Matt 3:12).

When Jesus appears and approaches John in the wilderness, John quite clearly says that it is he who needs to be baptized by Jesus (Matt 3:14). John is recognizing Jesus as the one he had been waiting for and was preparing the way for. He is recognizing him as the Messiah. The story too illustrates the Spirit of God descending on Jesus like a dove and marks the start of Jesus' ministry.

That's the background, but now John is in prison, he is not able to keep up with developments. His expectations are about the Messiah coming to pronounce judgment. But there has been little judgment – certainly not a 'chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire' type.

There has been teaching, healing and miracle stories, and John must have heard some of these. It's clear however that they are not really making sense to him. In his mind he had a clear picture of what the coming of the Messiah would mean. And that understanding was what he brought to the stories he was hearing about Jesus.

What it did not mean was eating with tax collectors, and healing lepers, and associating with the outcasts of society. What it did not mean was loving people so powerfully – Jews and gentiles, alike – that they were loved into repentance. The knowledge and understanding John had was brought to the stories he heard and made him ask questions.

I think that when people think of John the Baptist they mainly picture him preaching in the wilderness, and baptizing Jesus. Here is another aspect to his story. John is asking questions because Jesus is not behaving as he expected him to. John was so concerned that he sent some of his disciples to Jesus with the question, 'Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect someone else?' (Matt 11:3). He doubts whether Jesus is the Messiah after all.

The great preacher, who had his own disciples, the great proclaimer, and preparer, was doubting, because Jesus was not doing what he expected him to do.

What John needs is a new way to appreciate who the Messiah actually is. A new understanding about the sort of tasks the Messiah engages in and with what sort of people he does it. The picture in his mind of who the Messiah was did not match up with the reality.

Cold Mountain, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. When we have read a book and then see the film at the cinema, our imagination may form different pictures to those captured by the filmmakers. Perception and reality might differ. But in the end of the day these are all historical or imaginary worlds and it doesn't matter all that much.

But the real world that we live in matters, and Jesus Christ matters.

What John needs is a new way to appreciate who the Messiah actually is. A new understanding about the sort of tasks the Messiah engages in and with what sort of people he does it.

For the pictures in his mind did not match the reality of Jesus on the ground.

Sometimes we have pictures of Jesus that become set, that become comfortable, that become just as we like Jesus to be rather than reflecting who Jesus actually is.

As we draw ever closer to Christmas, and prepare to meet God anew in Jesus, may we be open to God surprising us, and open to the realization that Jesus may not be exactly as we would like. And let us embrace that Jesus, with open hearts, so that his light and the fire of his love may enthuse us and invigorate us.

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19th December: Advent 4

IMMANUEL

By the Revd Dr Andrew R. Morton
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Isaiah 7:10–17; Matthew 1:18–25

In Sellar and Yeatman's 'utterly memorable history' of England, *1066 and All That*, kings are either a good or a bad 'thing' or 'king', though sometimes more subtly a 'bad king' but 'good thing' or 'good king' but 'bad thing'. Ahaz, king of Judah in the latter 700s BCE is often depicted as both a bad king and a bad thing; but this goody/baddy approach does not do justice to the Bible. Ahaz had a tough choice when he succeeded his father, Uzziah, Two external forces threatened his little kingdom – its near neighbours, Israel/Ephraim and Syria just to the north and the more distant but more powerful Assyria away to the north east. Israel and Syria had chosen alliance as their response to the Assyrian threat and wanted Judah to join. Should Ahaz adopt that course of collective defence against the great power or the alternative of treating directly with Assyria for a peaceful accommodation? It was a real dilemma of diplomacy, a fine calculation of risks. He chose the latter strategy and as a result was attacked by his near neighbours, who were now at Jerusalem's gates.

Enter Isaiah, a prophet of great poetic imagination, who lit upon everyday events like births and drew out of them huge significance, even investing the babies' names with meaningful messages. Three in particular are mentioned in quick succession, the first and last being clearly his own children and the middle one born to someone cryptically called 'the young woman'. The first is called 'a remnant will return' (Shearjashub), the second 'God is with us' (Immanuel), the third 'speed spoil hurry booty' (Mahershalalhashbaz) – none of them easy to interpret, given the oblique approach of prophets and parable-tellers in a society for which names had strange power. The first, 'a remnant shall return' is on the face of it a message of hope, but a qualified one. It can be read either as the half-full glass of *at least* a return or the half-empty one of *at most* a remnant. The second, 'God is with us' seems unambiguously hopeful; what could be better than the supportive presence of God? The third however, 'speed spoil hurry booty' seems just as unambiguously unhopeful. What can it all mean? The whole of what Isaiah says (as in chapters 6–8) and the historical accounts elsewhere (as in 2 Kings 16 and 2 Chronicles 28) help to explain his overall message with its puzzling mixture of light and shade.

He foresees that in a matter of months even before the unnamed young woman's coming baby has reached the stage of self-consciousness that can make distinctions, the siege will be lifted because Israel and Syria will be devastated. However, he then dampens this good news with the bad news that the welcome defeat of these small attackers will spell also the unwelcome advance to Jerusalem's gates of the greater attacker, Assyria. Compared with the first attack, the second will be like the Tigris and Euphrates of modern Iraq rising over the hills and engulfing the modern Israel-Palestine in a flood that will submerge Jerusalem, mocking Ahaz's present preoccupation with its scanty threatened water supply. More literally, he speaks of a devastated land, without vines or any cultivation, only briars and thistles and the odd cow and sheep or goat to give the child, and presumably also the adults, only milk products and whatever the bees can produce. The third child's name is then given a clear meaning; it is that Israel's and Syria's wealth will be carried off to Assyria even before this child can say Daddy or Mummy.

What is Isaiah getting at? Is it only the rather discouraging message that the solving of one problem is the spawning of another, possibly bigger? Or that by focusing on lesser threats we take our eye off greater ones? Or just that life is a roller coaster, up one minute and down the next? The message is surely deeper. Is it this? Ahaz, like most leaders, was engaged in planning or strategy, a process based on calculating relative 'weights and measures', and if we give him the benefit of the doubt, doing so in the interests of those for whom he was responsible as well as himself. Probably we are all engaged in some way in such planning, which is an honourable and possibly necessary attempt to influence the future. Is Isaiah saying then that Ahaz, in his weighing up of different forces, has left one out, namely God? It is tempting to think so. Much in the scriptures seems to suggest that with Yahweh on their side the Hebrews tended to be victorious. So perhaps Ahaz, who went in for Baal-worship, was being advised to switch his loyalty to one of greater weight. After all, Elijah found on Mount Carmel that Yahweh gave

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him more fire power than Baal gave his priests. If that had been Isaiah's message, he would have had to promise Ahaz victory, like that of Gandalf over Sauron; he did not. That would have been to turn God into just another Baal, only bigger and better. 'God is with us' is not equivalent to 'may the force be with you', meaning that the superior power of God is on our side and therefore we will win. Hebrews and Christians have repeatedly thought this, using God like Baal as an instrument of our strategy, seeking to influence the future in our favour by praying. No, with the name 'Immanuel'/ 'God is with us' Isaiah is saying to Ahaz something like this: 'Step right out of the brackets of planning the future and leave all the fears and hopes that go with it, and face God who is confronting you here and now'. He does not add 'if so, all will be well'; rather he says in effect 'you will face a crisis or judgment'. Though this presumably does not mean that there is no place for us humans to seek to influence the future by our plans, it does mean that encountering God lifts us out of all that into a qualitatively and awesomely different place. It is a place in which the change now involved is not us changing the future but God changing us. Furthermore, that change involves our death; for the crisis or judgment inherent in God's very presence is in a real sense death-dealing.

What a gloomy pre-Christmas message! Surely the Immanuel of Matthew's gospel, the name given to the child of that other young woman, is utterly different and rings much more merry bells? No, it is this gospel which makes the explicit connection with Isaiah and for which his words obviously ring bells. For this birth too spelled death, and not only by immediately precipitating a massacre. This child was born to a whole life which precipitated a cataclysmic crisis, which not only issued in his own death but drew all others into it – a death by which alone they come to life. According to Isaiah, it is only when the proud oak or sacred terebinth is felled and the remnant that remains is no more than a stump that 'the stump becomes the holy seed', and thus the remnant does return. In the history of the house of David, to which both Ahaz and Jesus belong, it is through the felling that there comes 'a shoot out of the stump of Jesse'. What is new in this 'Immanuel' child is that he brings total confrontation with God, issuing in total death – and thereby total resurrection.

26th December

FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS

By the Revd Dr Russell Barr, BA, BD, MTh, DMin
Cramond, Edinburgh

Matthew 2:13–23

Like the wicked witch in the Christmas pantomime, the very mention of the name of king Herod is enough to send a shiver through the bravest congregation.

'He is behind you!' shout the children, their faces alive with the drama and excitement of the theatre. And what is the part Herod plays too, behind the drama of the nativity gospel, behind the wonder of the angelic host declaring peace on earth and goodwill to all, behind the humble shepherds keeping watch over their flocks, behind the stable with its manger cradling Mary's new born son, behind them all Herod stands, a dark, menacing presence.

There is so much that is good and lovely in the Christmas gospel, so much to celebrate and enjoy. But whatever else it is, the birth of Christ is no pantomime. It is real. And Herod's role helps remind us of that reality.

Rather than being the name given to one individual, we would do well to think of the name Herod as applying to a royal household or dynasty. In the same way as we talk about the house of Windsor or the house of the Stuarts, so we should talk about the house of Herod. There are in fact seven different Herods appearing at various points in the New Testament, all of them belonging to the one family who, in various capacities, ruled over all or parts of Palestine and neighbouring regions from *c.* 55 BC to *c.* 93 AD.

The family was not Jewish by blood but had adopted Judaism during the Maccabean uprising of the second century BC. Their rise to prominence was a mixture of talent and opportunity, and in the case of the Herod of Matthew's story, being in the right place at the right time. Rome had need of a strong handed ruler in what was their most rebellious region, and Herod was their man.

This Herod was from the third generation of the family. He had proved himself loyal and useful to the Romans in various battles and civil wars. In 47 BC he was appointed as governor of Palestine and was created king of Judea by the emperor Augustus in 40 BC. This Herod is Herod the Great.

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In many ways Herod the Great was deserving of his title. He was the only ruler of Palestine who ever succeeded in keeping peace and order in the region. He embarked upon an ambitious rebuilding programme including the rebuilding of Jerusalem's temple. He could be generous. In 25 BC famine struck the region and it is recorded that Herod melted down some of his own gold plate in order to purchase corn for the starving people.

But he could also be ruthless.

He was pathologically suspicious of any threat to his power. He ordered the assassination of various members of his own family and such was his reputation that Augustus was prompted to remark that it was safer to be Herod's pig than his son.

Set against this background, Matthew's account of the Magi being summoned to Herod, his demand that they should report back to him, his fury on discovering that he had been deceived and his subsequent orders to kill the male children under a certain age, bears the hallmark of authenticity.

Unwittingly Herod provides the nativity gospel two important services.

The first is to ground it historically. While there are no independent records to corroborate the visit of the shepherds or the magi, and no register of births, marriages and deaths to which we can turn for proof of what happened in Bethlehem, tangible evidence exists of Herod. He ruled Palestine for over forty years and died in the year 4 BC. In all probability Jesus was born a year or two before his death.

Secondly, as well as providing historical corroboration, Herod provides the nativity gospel with theological depth. For all his considerable achievements, Herod the Great was a nasty piece of work. His presence in the nativity gospel helps shake us free from the fairy light, tinsel covered Christmas that we have created to the real world of poverty, disease and armies of occupation into which Jesus was born. In this respect, Herod the Great reminds us that the church is engaged in a battle, a battle for what is right and good and true.

There have always been those who have reported on the death of God and the demise of the church. For people like the great Scottish philosopher, David Hume, the enlightenment belief in the power of reason rendered all appeal to faith not only unnecessary but undesirable. Faith in God was no longer needed to explain the world or to understand the meaning and purpose of life. Human reason was sufficient. God was dead, we were the masters of our own destiny.

At other times economic, psychological and sociological explanations have been offered to account for religious belief and the names of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud and Emile Durkheim are as familiar to students of theology as they are to students of the social sciences. But religion can no more be replaced by science or economics than can faith be explained away by psychological or sociological theory however elaborate.

And from the evidence of poverty in both the city and rural communities of Scotland, in the spread of HIV/AIDS the world over, in the continuing injustice in trading relationships between the rich and poor nations of the world, and in the bitter conflicts of the Middle East, it is evident we are not making much of a job mastering our own destiny.

Religion and religious conviction, Christian faith and the living witness of the Church continue to be as much a part of personal experience and public life as football, politics and music. The gospel hasn't withstood the test of time because, like the Roman lioness found some years ago at Cramond, it was embedded in mud: it continues because it happens to be true.

A little confidence in that truth would not go amiss.

The values of love and compassion, a concern for the needs of the poor and the vulnerable, a respect for education, a desire to cherish the God given gift of life including the life of creation, if these are some of the things that characterize us as Christian, then one of the tasks before us is to reclaim these values as having a public as well as a private truth.

With the advent of the new Scottish parliament, the Church of Scotland appointed one of its ministers, the Reverend Dr Graham Blount, to serve as the church's first full time parliamentary officer. Graham's task includes stimulating debate within the wider church on some of the key issues of the day as well as helping the church communicate its views in a meaningful way to the Parliament.

But it is a task which embraces us all, the task of giving a public face to the private convictions of our faith.

Herod could be accused of many things but never of being complacent. It would have been easy for him to dismiss the magi and their story but Herod had

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enough wit to inquire further. He sought the advice of the chief priests and then told the magi to report back to him. Interested or just plain paranoid, if there was something new happening then he wanted to know about it.

That new things are happening, that we are living at a time of important change not just in the political but in the social and cultural fabric of life, is beyond dispute. The Scotland in which I grew up in the 1950s and 1960s was a Scotland whose economy was dominated by heavy engineering companies like Glenfield & Kennedy, BMK, Massey Ferguson made my home town of Kilmarnock internationally famous. Many of the great ships that sailed the oceans were Clyde-built. In Greenock and Port Glasgow alone, the yards employed five hundred new apprentices each year.

Today shipbuilding has all but disappeared from the Clyde, people no longer anticipate a job for life and when did you last speak to a youngster serving an apprenticeship?

The changing pattern of work and employment is but one example of the dramatic changes affecting every aspect of life today. Those things that defined us, our family, our social class, our job, our nationality, no longer shape our destiny as once they did.; The world is changing and the church must recognize that the structure and patterns of membership that served it well in the past are no longer so useful today.

What it does need though is confidence, confidence in the concern and commitment of its people, confidence in the truth of its gospel, confidence in the love of the Word made flesh, confidence that the final judgment does not rest with the Herods of this world.

Herod the Great was one of the most influential princes of his day. In Jerusalem and other cities he built theatres and stadiums, and archaeological remains of his palace can still be seen near Jericho. But his presence in Matthew's nativity gospel reveals more about the purpose of the incarnation than we ever dare imagine. After all it was for the Herods of this world that Jesus was born.

Darkness and light both have their place in the Christmas story and at the turning of a year, Herod the Great provides the reassurance we need that joy and pain, triumph and tragedy are both embraced within the loving providence of God.

ABRAHAM AND THE NATIONS

Dissertations on a single verse of the Bible sometimes arouse the suspicion that a mountain is being made of a mole-hill. However, Keith N. Grüneberg's study of Genesis 12:3, *Abraham, Blessing and the Nations: A Philological and Exegetical Study of Genesis 12:3 in Its Narrative Context* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003. €78.00. pp. xii + 296. ISBN 3–11–017837–0), is timely and well executed. This verse links Abraham and the nations in blessing but how? The issue turns in part on the handling of the verb in the last clause of Genesis 12:3: is it reflexive 'bless themselves' (RSV), or rather passive 'be blessed' (NRSV)? But there are attendant problems. What is Abraham's role in this blessing? What of parallel passages that seem to know or echo this verse? And so on.

Grüneberg examines the component parts of the problem in turn: various parallels, linguistic foundations (especially the Hebrew *niphal* and *hithpael*), the semantics of *BRK* (to bless), and the detail of 12:3, offering a responsible close 'final form' reading against the wider literary context. While to my mind the order is surprising (the close reading of 12:3 comes later than I expected), nonetheless the mass of detailed evidence is marshalled sensibly and fluently. In Grüneberg's hands, the evidence converges on the passive reading of the verse: Abraham, and, by extension Israel, 'by acting as this model … allow others to gain blessing' (p. 188). Clearly there is a great deal of interest in this persuasive monograph, and perhaps more than Grüneberg himself acknowledges: while this review was in preparation, a television series went to air on 'The Children of Abraham', examining the fraught relations between Jews, Christians, and Moslems. The latter of these groups is left out of Grüneberg's account. It remains a rich study, its neat presentation marred by an unfortunate typo in its final sentence.

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