

Christmas 2022

Psalm 98

Titus 3:4-7

Luke 20:1-20

Sequins aren't going to win the war, but they do make a difference. They change perspective. While drones and missiles attempted to strike infrastructure targets above, in an underground station somewhere in Kyiv, a studio was set up and acts performed in their shiny outfits so the Ukrainian entry for Eurovision could be chosen. Eurovision 2023 should be hosted there but Liverpool is going to host on their behalf for the obvious reason that President Putin's a sad git. The Eurovision self-parodies, the glitter, the emotive lyrics and gyrations in a bomb shelter, somehow judge the bleak, grey militarism more than angry speeches at the UN ever could. That the people he victimises can parody themselves judges Putin's self-delusion. That there be laughter in the bunker highlights the deathly pallor of the aggressor's jealous, lonely face.

Normally we're a bit embarrassed to talk about the judgement of God. Being bound up so long with state powers has allowed the church in this part of the world to develop a severe judgemental reputation, frowning over people, controlling the ethical agenda. We've spent a few decades trying to shed the reputation of self-righteousness, of tending to shame. We recoil from accusing anyone of sin. We have finally realised the Church is not judge. God is, and thank God for that.

Sometimes, though, a word such as "sin" is too mild. The bombed out maternity hospitals, the forests shredded by shrapnel, the ruined crops while distant countries starve, the weeping Russian mother receiving the news she most dreaded: this all demands the severest judgment, fiery language, God's booming voice. In marginalising the church's judgement, we should not be embarrassed about God's.

I wonder how you picture God in the Psalm Dharshi read for us. Is s/he standing or sitting? What is the posture of that bared holy arm?

The psalm is free from our imperial baggage and is very mature and balanced about God's judgement. It knows it is necessary and rejoices when it comes, wonderfully celebrating with music when it finally comes. The Psalmist knows, unlike our clumsy judgements from our partial vision, God's judgement is wise and life giving. It leads to mercy, relief, liberation. Again, as we reflected last Sunday with Isaiah, the whole creation joins in the relief. This is not mere anthropomorphism. The roaring sea, the singing hills, the clapping floodwaters are meant to make us throw back our heads and laugh at ourselves for fearing God's judgement. Moreover, it is not anachronistic to speak of environmental passions in the Psalm. Hebrew spirituality, calendar and law enmeshed human fortunes with the health of the natural world in ways we have foolishly forgotten. Indeed, the unconscious creation will have something to celebrate as our cleverly conscious human behaviour wrecking the environment finally meets God's judgment.

Having embraced the Psalmist's vision of divine judgement we are expectant as his arrival is announced. In our imagination we shift to the place where he did indeed come to judge the world: in the manger, en-fleshed as a baby. We are surprised to find the bare arm not of a warrior king but of a new-born infant, creased and jerky as it tests its movement and feels the cold air for the first time, unsure whether it likes this new freedom, then suddenly restricted again, wound tight with swaddling bands. We may ask how this presence judges human behaviour. What does it draw out of us as we bring the year's war, pantomime politics and our own regrets into his presence?

The intimacy of detail around the wordless infant, full of pathos and danger, stand out against the huge political backdrop and the grey manipulation of their lives by the Imperial machine. So all our de-humanising efforts, from trafficking people to reducing them to their illness; from “collateral damage” military euphemism to ethnic profiling, are judged by the humanising detail of displaced parents defying the conditions and swaddling their child.

His arrival by such gynaecological means judges our embarrassment, shame and shaming around sex, reproduction, and food: after all, the same organs by which he was delivered also purge the body of waste after eating and are the epicentre of sexual pleasure. It’s a story that certainly judges male control of female health and sexual choices.

His vulnerable presence in the animals’ trough blends human fortunes with the well-being of all creation and so judges our abusive relationship with creation. That COP 27 be held in Egypt, the country to which Jesus’ family fled raises that sense of inter-dependence even higher this particular year.

If we let him, the infant God, dependent, crying, needy, vulnerable beckons out of us our sympathy, our protectiveness. If we let his cries penetrate the walls of our defensiveness, challenge our militarism and unsettle our feigned adult control he may raise the compassion we have long suppressed.

In his vulnerability, on the brink of refugee status, the infant unknowingly holds before us today the bombed maternity hospitals, shivering soldiers and be-suited lying leaders. He judges the invasion of neighbours; judges the deceit; judges the destructiveness that makes humanity look ridiculous. From his make-shift cot, God judges our hard heartedness towards neighbours in need.

From his less than hygienic birth place, he judges our healthcare crisis and sheds light on all who strive to improve provision, while at the same time also highlighting and judging the disparities in healthcare around the world.

All this before he has said a word. If God has come among us in such a way, no home and no mighty power is beyond the reach of her judgment. To say God’s judgement is final is to say, with relief, only God is God. But it is not final in the sense of way in the future: it’s already here. It’s not final as in end of the story. God’s judgement always leads on to life. His/Her choice of arrival is disruptive and revealing, but not controlling. The swaddling bands confining the bared holy arm tell us divine judgment is to prompt *us* to action.

This is enacted for us energetically by those first visitors. Their journey from fear (for a divine light will surely judge them harshly and reveal their shabbiness) to joy and effervescent sharing of something beautiful. Human hierarchies have been judged by the angels choosing them and then by their eager response and their immediate pleasure in sharing, not hoarding the good news. Around Jesus, the best is drawn out of people and their lives are bent towards joy. They return still as shepherds, are now lives full of light. The emperor is still emperor. They are still low-paid key workers. But the world looks different. It’s those sequins again. Nothing’s changed yet everything has. How inclusive will they go on to be, having been startled to be included? How are their relationships deepened whenever there’s an ordinary birth in the neighbourhood? Now that they can never deny the reality and authority of heaven, what will they tell their grandchildren when they hear of Jesus’ death and rumours of resurrection thirty years later?

Ordinary lives are changed, thrown into vivid high definition when they are turned from drudgery to vocation by the company of Jesus. The transformative judgement that leads to life is God's but it is mediated through radical, subversively joyful ordinary people: anyone who is willing to let God's judgement in to release them.

God could have stood on stone steps, or sat on a throne to deliver her judgment. Instead s/he chose this. God's non-controlling naked appearance startles us as much as if he had burst in on *us*, naked in the shower. Those who are offended by his vulnerability, and fear and refuse his judgement, like Herod, will spiral into self-destructive violence. But proper the acceptance of God's judgement embodied in Christ does not end in fear, but with an energy that makes community, makes connection, shares blessing.

It's an invitation to have a bit of what the underground Eurovision singers and the hilltop shepherds are on: "the Spirit God poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ who saves us"... from ourselves. (Titus 3:6) No, sequins won't win the war, but they might win the soul.