

Sermon Archive 513

Sunday 15 December, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Reflection: The fullness of Time

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Thoughts on a Photo

The picture on the front page of the order of service comes from the closing scene of the film "Billy Elliott". It features the left profile of a now adult ballet dancer about to go on stage to dance in Matthew Bourne's re-working of Tchaikovsky's Swan Lake. This "going onto stage" marks his transition from eager hopeful to a serious, recognised participant in professional ballet.

The movie has followed Billy to this point, from his first ballet experiences as an eleven year old, a child of a single father, an eventually out-of-work miner in a town hit hard by Thatcherite economic reforms. There's very little money around, and so the money given to Billy, by his father, to pay for boxing lessons is precious. Initially, Billy manages to keep secret from his father the fact that he's spending his boxing money on ballet lessons. This is no social culture for

boys to explore ballet in. These are no financial times for good money to be spent absurdly. So Billy's love of dance has to be a dirty little secret. The trouble is not so much that dancing speaks to Billy's heart, and makes him feel alive within this dying, depressing landscape that is his home, as much as is that he's really talented at ballet. His progress is such that his teacher wants him to audition for prestigious ballet schools, and get himself on stage. Well, stages are pretty public places, and it's hard to be on one while you're trying to keep a secret.

The tension for Billy is knowing that this is who he is, this is what he wants to do, this is what he knows his life should be. The tension for Billy's father, who is a good man, albeit crippled by his context and culture, is understanding who his son is, letting go of his fears and prejudices, and finding what he needs to provide in terms of support for his son.

So the photo, on the front of the order of service is of Billy, knowing that his father is in the audience of this major ballet theatre, and is proud of his son, about to take his place on the stage he always knew was calling him. He steps onto the stage, and leaps into the story he knows is his. The story has been waiting, and now (with love and support, and with a huge story of overcoming behind him) now he enters it. This is for him, and his story, a critical moment - it is the fullness of time.

Reflection:

"See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple."

For some astrologers from the East, who won't arrive in the story for a little while yet, nevertheless there has been a sense for them that something significant is appearing in the stars - something that speaks of a fullness of time. I guess they've spent year studying the stars, so ought to be respected for the ways they're reading things into them - even though that's not really our kind of thing. As we noted, they're from the East (and they do things differently there). Their suspicion is that a king (of quite some significance) is to be born. And the suspicion is sufficiently strong for them to mount their camels and go off on a journey. Tradition will give them names, and put into their hands all manner of glorious gifts. What do star gazers talk about on such a journey? At night, as they break and sit around their fires, do they talk wisdom or rubbish. If they're like me (or any of us really), they probably straddle both. It's a ships of the desert convoy towards a person and a place they can't quite yet articulate. But they're about to fall onto the stage on which

the story of "God with us" is unfolding. This is indeed, for them the fullness of time.

Closer to home, there are shepherds. For the moment they're not on anything of a journey that compares to the astrologers. They're just sitting on a hillside - actually no. It was Moses who was on a hillside when he spotted a burning bush. No mention of hillsides here - that's just the poetry of Christmas kicking in. These shepherds are abiding in the fields - open to the same open skies that lead the astrologers. I don't know whether the shepherds believe in angels. Being first Century Hebrews, they probably do - even though I imagine none of them have ever seen one - (sometimes we do believe in things we've never seen). They too (like the astrologers) probably have a camp fire, since it's cold at night, under the stars - and before you use the fire to keep warm, you can use it to cook your dinner. I wonder what shepherds have for dinner - hopefully something warm. What do shepherds talk about? I don't know - although I could guess. Maybe about their families. Maybe about the bloody Romans. Probably not about the age old hope of their ancestors and their ancient belief that in the fullness of time a Messiah would come. Indeed, probably not. When did a shepherd last talk to you about that? Maybe one of them has a son who likes to dance, rather than to box. Maybe another one is shepherding, because his other job was restructured away. They're all people with histories, with things to contend with. For now, there is no angel song in their sky. But the arc of their lives is about to dip into a scene in a stable - where they will be drawn into the story of "God with us". You know, for these shepherds abiding in the fields, this is the coming close of the fullness of time.

Back in Ein Karem, a place closer to Nazareth than Bethlehem, a little family are hunkering into their night. It's Zachariah, Elizabeth and wee John, their new baby. Actually, since there's a census on, and everyone's moving around the country to their ancestral homes, maybe this wee family isn't at home. If they're not, I hope they're having better luck than Elizabeth's cousin, Mary, who can't find herself anywhere to stay. Both Zachariah and Elizabeth reckon, I think, that something like the fullness of time is coming. Three months ago now, the yet-to-be-born John had jumped in his mother's womb, and she'd sung this song of praise when Mary had come to visit. They all knew that this time was special - that sooner, rather than later their story would get swept up and into the other story - the one of "God with us". What had prepared them for this moment? Hard to tell. But the way they knew one another, the way they read the ancient hope of their ancestors, the way that the baby stirred

within his mother, all brought them to the point of knowing that time was ripe - time for "God with us" - this is time about to tip into the fullness of time.

These are different snapshots of the beginning of the formation of the Jesus people - the people who celebrate how the birth of Jesus breaks open, into their lives, the story of God being with us. Billy stands in the wings of the stage, ready to step into what all the days of his life have been preparing. And these people whose roles will become famous as the story is told, then re-told year by year, are all about to join the drama.

Last week, I said that we all need to be able to see ourselves within the story of God. If we are to be nurtured by "God with us", we need to know that the story is ours.

So here's a wee thought experiment. Let's add another chapter. This chapter is about Matthew, a sixty-something bloke from the other side of the world. In his hands he finds a story book, about a baby born to an un-wed couple of displaced people in a census. He reads of shepherds having their skies torn open by angel song and something they only can call "glory". He reads of astrologers arriving with gold, frankincense and myrrh. It somehow moves him to read the story again, then again, then again. He doesn't know what he's been spending the last sixty years doing, but he feels like it's been something like a preparation for hearing this story deeply, and having it seep into who he is. He's not a shepherd. He's not a star-gazer. He's someone who's heard the story, and finds it speaking to his conviction that God is with us. His life feels now like it's something of a stage upon which together we act the drama of God being with us.

Mad? Maybe. Probably seemed mad to the shepherds too - until they were drawn into the fullness of time. Maybe the story is just waiting for us to join it. With us in the fullness of time . . .

Why do we do Christmas every year? Is our reading of it again and again part of a preparing us to become part of the story.

*What can I give Him, poor as I am?
If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;
Yet what I can I give Him: give my heart.*

These hearts, these lives, are ready for the fullness of time - a story of God with us.

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