Ist January, 2017

And behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name Jesus.

My favourite Christmas Carol was written by one of the first Christian hymn writers, the fourth century poet, Prudentius. His poem frames Christmas with eternity, and gives us a sense of the weighty mysteries which are being played out in the birth of the baby in an outbuilding, in a place in the back of beyond, to Joseph, the carpenter from Nazareth, and the young girl he married in dubious circumstances, called Mary:

Of the Father’s love begotten, ere the worlds began to be,
He is Alpha and Omega, He the source, the ending He,
Of the things that are, that have been,
And that future years shall see, evermore and evermore!

Prudentius reminds us that the baby born in the stable is God the Son, the eternally begotten Word of God, of one substance with the Father, who, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is eternally God the Trinity – Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end; the Creator and source of all things and the goal and end of all things; the providential orderer of all that is, all that has been and all that is to come, until the end of the ages.

This is more than we can begin to apprehend, of course. We can readily enter into the very human drama of the birth of a baby, feel love and affection for him and rejoice at his arrival. But there are other elements of the drama which are more disconcerting: what about the star, the angel’s song, the kings who will arrive next week to pay this baby homage?

Prudentius reminds us that the birth of Christ, although it can and does inspire a very human response, is very different from any other human birth. That all that has passed has been leading up to this moment, that it is the turning point for all that is, that it will change all that is to come.

Christ’s birth is a moment of fulfilment, when things shift, and a new age begins. We have just passed through such a moment: the end of an old year, the bells at midnight, the beginning of 2017. We will have marked it, celebrated it – and no doubt paused to reflect on what has passed
and what might be to come. It is a moment when we are prompted to see our lives in the context of something bigger: as a point in the movement of the ages, the passing of time, caught between past and future. We make resolutions to be a better person, hold out hope for a better future, a better world. We remember, we reflect and we hope.

Births, deaths, weddings, retirements.. are all such moments. The Church’s calendar is the same: moving through Advent, the Annunciation, Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Ascension, we map out God’s ways, his promises and actions towards us across time and history, and allow them to shape our lives. We remember, we reflect, and we live in hope, seeking to conform our lives to God as he has revealed himself to us. It is only in this context that we are able to begin to understand Christmas, as Prudentius does, in the context of eternity; to apprehend that the baby born in the outhouse is the eternal Word of God; to feel not only tenderness and love for a new-born baby, but also awe and reverence – unbearable awe that God should descend, empty himself, and limit his eternal, limitless being to the confines of temporal, mortal human flesh for our salvation.

The feast that we celebrate today is another one of those events in the Church’s calendar that both reminds us of God’s ways, prompts us to reflect on them in the light of our own present, and moves us to conform and reform our lives to his purposes. It is the feast of the Naming and Circumcision of our Lord. We discovered its origin in our first lesson, as God commanded Abraham to circumcise all new-born males on the eighth day after their birth, as a mark of belonging to the people of the covenant. In our second lesson, in a Christian context, physical circumcision was replaced by spiritual circumcision – by the entire devotion of one’s whole life to God. The fact that the new-born Jesus was circumcised, according to Jewish Law, and given the name Jesus – or Joshua – the one who saves, is an example of the way in which every event in his life must be seen in the context of eternity: Jesus, the Son of God, born of Mary, is identified as the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, as the longed-for Messiah, the deliverer, the one who will save God’s people, Israel. It is this which aged holy man, Simeon, sees so clearly when Mary’s baby is is brought to the temple, and in fulfillment of the the angel’s command to Mary and to Joseph, given the name Jesus. He takes him up in arms and utters what we now sing, in every Evensong, as the Nunc Dimittis:

Lord, now lettest thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:
For mine eyes have seen they salvation,
Which thou has prepared before the face of all people;
To be a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

In a very important way, then, the Naming and Circumcision of Jesus is, like the star, or the arrival of the three kings, a reminder that the baby Jesus is no ordinary baby; he is also the Lamb of God, the one who will be sacrificed for the sins of the world.

The Carol which the choir sang at Nine Lessons and Carols movingly captures this.
It begins with Mary’s loving musings on her son, born to be king:

‘When He is King we will give Him the King’s gifts,
myrrh for its sweetness and gold for a crown,
Beautiful robes’ said the young girl to Joseph,
Fair with her first-born on Bethelem Down.

But the Carol then continues to draw out the true reality of her son’s Kingship:
When he is King they will clothe Him in grave-sheets,
Myrrh for embalming, and wood for a crown,
He that lies now in the white arms of Mary
Sleeping so lightly on Bethelem Down.

Mary’s child is a baby born to suffer and to die; to be a man of sorrow, who will be despised, rejected, acquainted with grief. Her baby, fairest among the sons of men, will be the crucified one, who had no form or comeliness that we should look at him.

I have, of course, been quoting Isaiah, but I’m guessing that you may have also have heard strains of Handel’s Messiah as I did this. The Messiah is often performed at this time of year and does exactly what today’s feast does: it sets the birth of the Messiah in the context of the great scheme of salvation, from Old Testament to New Testament; from Israel to the Church; from prophecy to fulfillment, carefully identifying the prophecies which foreshadow the Messiah’s coming, and which have now been brought to pass in the birth of Jesus, the one who saves. Handel’s Messiah is like Prudentius’ hymn, like the Church’s year: it allows to remember, to reflect and then to conform ourselves to God’s revelation of himself.
This, then, is what we are then prompted to do at the beginning of our calendar year. Prudentius reminded us of God’s eternity and providence, the source and end of all that has been, is, and will be to come. The Church’s year begins at the beginning of Advent, with the Annunciation and the conception of the baby who will be born at Christmas. Today we are reminded that the way in which we are enabled to participate in God’s eternal purposes is by acknowledging Him in the baby born in an outhouse – not as any other adorable baby but as the promised Messiah, our deliverer and savior.

We are reminded that the tiny Lamb, who invites all our protectiveness, will become the Lamb who is slain. This is at once cause for hope – but also of love – a rather different sort of love than the one inspired by small animals, or adorable babies. It is a love which, like the Father’s eternal begetting of the Son, is caught up in eternity; a love which is defined by self-giving, and ultimately self-emptying; a love which gives life and will die to restore and renew life. Let us remember, reflect and hope in him at the beginning of this new year, who was born, according to the promises of God, and named Jesus, the one who saves.