

## **Power to Become Children**

*Isaiah 52.7–10; John 1.1–18*

Sermon at the Eucharist on Christmas Morning 2007  
in the Cathedral Church of Christ, Blessed Mary the Virgin, and Cuthbert of Durham  
by the Bishop of Durham, Dr N. T. Wright

‘There was a birth, certainly, We had evidence and no doubt.’ So say the Magi in T. S. Eliot’s poem. Some have read that dogged statement as a kind of grudging semi-belief. The poem strikes me, on the contrary, as a realistic and explosive statement of the meaning of Christmas. It insists that with this birth something fresh has been introduced into this old world, something so radically new that it shakes that old world to its foundations, and leaves those who witness it and know it to be true aware of a deeply uncomfortable dual citizenship. They discover, in witnessing the birth of this child, that they themselves are summoned to die to themselves, to the old world they knew. ‘We returned,’ say the Magi, ‘to our places, these kingdoms’ (I always hear that with a kind of weary sneer: ‘these kingdoms – what are they? They’re not the real thing’),

But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,  
With an alien people clutching their gods.

No longer at ease. Perhaps the charge of semi-belief comes from people who want Christmas to make us feel at ease, at home, whereas the one thing Christmas ought always to do is to make us feel uneasy, aware of the clash between the new world which is born this day and the old world in which that new birth is, and always will be, a scandal and an offence. We just sang, to a cheerful tune but I hope with a heavy heart,

This did Herod sore affray  
And grievously bewilder;  
So he gave the word to slay  
And slew the little childer.

And it won’t do simply to say, with the next verse, that this is all right really because ‘Mary’s gentle child will lead us up to glory.’ The Herods of this world matter, and to learn to be ill at ease under their rule is also part of the meaning of Christmas.

But let’s start with birth itself. Our own birth, the new birth of which St John speaks: as many as received him, he gave power to become children of God.

It has long been fashionable in England to sneer at the notion of being ‘born again’. Perhaps this was because a certain type of preacher was over-zealous, warning devout churchgoers that unless they had had a particular kind of religious experience they weren’t genuine Christians. Perhaps it was partly because of psychological theories popular a century or so ago, in which being ‘twice-born’ was a personality type to be regarded with some alarm and suspicion by the ordinary, ‘normal’ people. And by the time Jimmy Carter became President of the United States the phrase ‘born-again

Christian' was enough to send a smirk across the face or even a shiver down the spine. Reporters used to say things like, 'so-and-so, who like Mr Carter seems to have been born a bit too often'. And when, nearly nine years ago, Glen Hoddle was sacked as England's football manager for articulating his own brand of Hindu beliefs about reincarnation, the media described him as 'a born-again Christian', which seems now merely to mean 'someone who holds bizarre religious beliefs and takes them a bit too seriously'.

So what do we make of the promise, at the heart of the Christmas gospel: 'To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God'? This promise nestles right beside John's decisive statement of the incarnation: the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. When we celebrate the birth of the Word, we are commanded to think also about our own new birth; and this promise is fleshed out, famously, three chapters later in Jesus' night-time conversation with Nicodemus: unless you are born again, born of water and spirit, you can neither see nor enter God's kingdom. We Anglicans have traditionally found all this a bit threatening; indeed, some people, I suspect, become Anglicans to escape the constant banging on about being born again they have encountered in other traditions.

But I've noticed that the reticence in our culture about being born again is parallel with the equally common reticence about, or even antipathy towards, two other things: the notion of Jesus' being born of a virgin, on the one hand, and the notion that the birth of Jesus has political meaning, on the other. Now at first blush these three things, the transformation of someone's inner life, the doctrine of the virginal conception of Jesus, and the political meaning of the gospel, may look completely different. But on closer inspection you find that they are all about God doing something quite new in the world; and our culture as a whole has become extremely resistant to any such idea.

Take the virgin birth, for example. Let's get rid of any idea that we now know that virgin births don't happen because we know about modern genetic science. Actually, people two thousand years ago were not ignorant. As C. S. Lewis once tartly pointed out, the reason Joseph was worried about Mary's pregnancy was not because he didn't know where babies came from but because he did. It was fascinating, in a classic moment of misreporting a few days ago, that when the Archbishop of Canterbury pointed out that Matthew doesn't say how many Magi there were people thought he was a heretic, but when he said he really did believe in the virginal conception of Jesus nobody noticed. Actually, the strange story of Jesus' being conceived without a human father is so peculiar, particularly within Judaism, and so obviously open to sneering accusations on the one hand and the charge that the Christians were simply aping the pagans on the other, that it would be very unlikely for someone to invent it so early in the Christian movement as Matthew and Luke. But there's more to it than just that. The virginal conception speaks powerfully of new creation, something fresh happening within the old world, beyond the reach and dreams of the possibilities we currently know. And if we believe that the God we're talking about is the creator of the world, who longs to rescue the world from its corruption and decay, then an act of real new creation, anticipating in

fact the great moment of Easter itself, might just be what we should expect, however tremblingly, if and when this God decides to act to bring this new creation about. The ordinary means of procreation is one of the ways, deep down, in which we laugh in the face of death. Mary's conception of Jesus has no need of that manoeuvre. 'In him was life, and the life was the light of all people.' The real objection to the virginal conception is not primarily scientific. It is deeper than that. It is the notion that a new world really might be starting up within the midst of the old, leaving us with the stark choice of birth or death; leaving us, like the Magi, no longer at ease: leaving us, in other words, as Christmas people faced with the Herods of the world.

Because the second example, that of God in public, comes bang into focus as soon as the authorities in Jerusalem get wind that there may be a royal baby around somewhere. The Herods of our day, too, scream blue murder at any suggestion that God would break out of his 'religious' box and challenge the actual powers of the world, whether the politicians or the media or the high priests of scientific materialism. I find it strangely comforting, actually, that people like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens take the trouble to attack us so viciously: it shows that, like Herod, they are rattled, they know their number is being called, their power base is being challenged. Good: that is how it should be. But there are all kinds of objections raised, too, to the suggestion that God might be interested in, let alone might act freshly within, the public world, the political world. When I preached here last night at the Midnight Communion I drew out from the Christmas story a little of what seem to me the rather obvious meaning in terms of God's care for the vulnerable; and I mentioned, along with the hill-farmers, the asylum seekers who are being hounded by the government in an arbitrary and inhumane fashion. Though many people thanked me for what I said I was confronted at the back of the cathedral by one man who told me to stick to the script, to keep religion and politics separate, and who said in particular that asylum-seekers have nothing to do with Christmas. Well, sorry, but if you read Matthew 2, let alone Matthew 25, I think you'll find that political realities in general and asylum-seekers in particular leap off the page at you as the Holy Family seek refuge in Egypt and as Jesus speaks of welcoming the stranger and discovering that you have been welcoming him in person.

The things our old world sneers at, then, hang together. Our entire culture simply doesn't want to know about a God who does something new. Christmas as nostalgia: that's fine, it's part of the old world that makes us feel at home. Christmas as shopping bonanza: that's fine, too, because again we have subsumed the message back into the old world of getting and spending. Christmas as family time; well, that's OK, though it is now routine to sneer at that too, perhaps because families, warts and all, can actually be a sign of God's grace and new life. But Christmas as the living God doing a new thing under the nose of Herod, doing a new thing within the womb of Mary, and even, shock horror, doing a new thing within our own hearts and lives: that is so threatening that it's best, so our culture thinks, to sneer at the very mention.

Because what we are promised, in that strange phrase at the heart of John's prologue, is a new kind of power: to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God. Power to become children! There's a paradox for you: power to

become powerless, authority to be under authority. Ah, people will say, but children of God; yes, but the meaning of the word 'God' is now being redefined, in this very paragraph, so that we only really discover who God is when we look at Jesus, Jesus the helpless baby, Jesus the one who reveals God's glory when he dies on the cross, Jesus the only begotten Son who has revealed the invisible God. And when we hear that gospel word, and discover that something new is happening within us, something is stirring which feels very like faith, and hope, and love, we know that a new kind of life has taken hold on us, meaning that we have indeed been born again, whether a moment before or a lifetime before, have been made new with a life which death cannot touch, a life which will lighten our path through whatever darkness lies ahead, a life which doesn't spring from mere human possibilities – born, says John, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. Power to become children: that's the promise of new birth, full of grace and truth.

Part of the art of listening to scripture is learning to hear the multiple overtones in a single, simple phrase. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, says John: and we learn, and learn again, every Christmas, to hear in that great and simple statement all the glory of the new world, with its new possibilities: new life in Mary's womb, new life within the increasingly dangerous public world which does its best to squash the rumour, and new life, please God, in our own hearts and lives and families and work. And the Word became flesh and lived among us. That is what we celebrate today: the new reality which leaves us no longer at ease in the old dispensation, but determined to live and rejoice and be part of his transforming work of new creation, so that though the world declares that it can't see God and doesn't know who he is we may declare, in what we are as well as what we say, that God the only Son, the Word made flesh, close to the Father's heart, has made him known and will make him known. May that be true in us and through us this Christmas time and always.