

Tuesday of Holy Week

12.04.2022
By Janet Foggie

Introduction

It might be that the question for today's reading is: do we believe in angels? And, if we do, what is their role in the Christian faith? The angel has become, for many of us, a child in a nightgown with wings and a tinsel crown, who mouths lines in a nativity play to the adoration of the audience. The nativity angel has stuck our concept of angels to one time of year, and to a syrupy, emotionally-charged setting where the creation of a nativity play is intertwined with family love, parental pride, and youthful achievement. All these things may be good things, but the suggestion of the intervention of an angel in today's text is none of these.

'A voice came from heaven' in the text and some of the people hearing it thought it was thunder; others ascribed it to an angel.

- Were they right?
- What is your interpretation of the text?
- To whom do the angels speak in Holy Week?
- What is it that they say?

Text

John 12:20-36

Now among those who went up to worship at the festival were some Greeks. They came to Philip, who was from Bethsaida in Galilee, and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus." Philip went and told Andrew; then Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. Jesus answered them, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life. Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever

serves me, the Father will honour.“ Now my soul is troubled. And what should I say —‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour. Father, glorify your name.” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” The crowd standing there heard it and said that it was thunder. Others said, “An angel has spoken to him.” Jesus answered, “This voice has come for your sake, not for mine. Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.” He said this to indicate the kind of death he was to die. The crowd answered him, “We have heard from the law that the Messiah remains forever. How can you say that the Son of Man must be lifted up? Who is this Son of Man?” Jesus said to them, “The light is with you for a little longer. Walk while you have the light, so that the darkness may not overtake you. If you walk in the darkness, you do not know where you are going. While you have the light, believe in the light, so that you may become children of light.” After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.

Comment

Edmund Hamilton Sears was born in Sandfield Massachusetts in April 1810. The youngest of three sons, he was academically able, studying law then divinity, and was ordained to ministry in the Unitarian Church. Ministry was hard work, and after seven years of overwork and pressure he had a breakdown. He took a part-time job as a preacher in Wayland and during that time he wrote the hymn, ‘It came upon a midnight clear.’ In this hymn he examined the contrast between human conflict and the peace of God in such a way as to explain to himself the continuing existence of conflict, and perhaps also his own suffering by it.

In our text today we have the interjection of the divine voice, “Then a voice came from heaven, “I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.” Do we, like the crowd, ascribe it to thunder? Or do we side with those who thought it an angel? Or was it the voice of God? For Sears, the supernatural realm and the realm of nature were intertwined and indivisible. The angelic realm, and the community of the saints, were not metaphors, but realities which guided his ethical and moral stance on issues much more pressing to those around him at the time.

Despite having been burned out by the early parish years, Sears did not allow this experience to mellow him or to take the sharpness from his thinking. In 1850 the Fugitive Slave Act was passed, which meant that all runaway slaves had to be returned to their former owners. Sears preached against this law, using the argument that divine law supersedes human legislation – an argument which his opponents may have interpreted as treason.

As Jesus tries in our text today to prepare his followers for his suffering and death, he points beyond them to the spiritual realities expressed as light and dark. For Sears, this was a connection of moral, ethical and spiritual values to his natural life, and therefore to the lives of former slaves, women, and others to whom equality was not granted in his time.

If we read this text as a moment when the supernatural, divine or spiritual

interjects into the world, then it might give us more questions than it resolves. For many modern Christians, the angel is relegated to the nativity play, and Sears' hymn to watchnight services. To read this again as live to modern politics, to modern conflict, and to the reality of 'man at war with man' or, as the modernisers of the Church of Scotland Hymnary revised it 'warring humankind', can we find some understanding of what it would be to preach of the peace and immortality of the spirit in our own age?

Where are the issues which demonstrate that modern law and divine law might be in conflict? What can the preacher say to show the love, peace and glory of God this Holy Week which challenges the treatment of others led by darkness? How would our society change if we treated all humans in the light?

Rather than spelling out individual issues, should we preach on principle? To do so was a very common 19th century method of preaching, and is perhaps less common today. Do we tend more to follow the call given to Isaiah, 'comfort, comfort my people', than that proposed by Jesus as he faced his own death? Jesus chose honesty and challenge. He told his followers his soul was troubled, he told them that trouble was to come, yet they could not or would not believe him – the message was not getting through.

For Sears, honesty and challenge were an undeniable moral duty as part of his call to preach. He placed that above the law of the country in which he lived. His understanding of a Christian life was imbued with acceptance of suffering, and the contrasts he drew between suffering and sin in this life, and peace, worship and communion in the next, were his means of accepting the trouble and conflict in the world. In another of his works, on the fourth gospel, he wrote of the reality of death as part of the human experience which we could neither control or deny, but which for him was very much a passing into an immortal reality, and not an end of our souls or personhood. We may reject his approach, change the words of his hymns, and relegate him to a side-show role at Christmas, but something of his life and ministry speaks to me. I can't help seeing in the work of Sears the words and actions of Christ as he tried to tell his disciples in Holy Week that worse was to come, yet the worst was not to be the end.

We do not know how it felt to be Jesus at the end of this difficult discussion with his friends. It is hard to read from the text feelings as we would understand them in 2022, and perhaps unwise to try such an ahistorical exercise. But we are told that he hid. For Sears, after burnout, he took a part-time role for a while; Jesus needed to be alone. He needed to hide. Too often the preacher is not 'allowed' to hide: over and over again Jesus is found by crowds after trying to be alone. The desire to recover one's equilibrium in private is another coping mechanism, much used by leaders over the last 2000 years but perhaps less accepted or understood today. Our response to conflict or trauma tends towards encouraging the burnt-out or lost person to talk – talking and healing have become indistinguishable. Yet, the desire to hide, the need for privacy, the desire for safety: all these remain as responses to conflict which are reasonable and perhaps sometimes more advisable than talking. We may be tempted to be very selective when we ask ourselves, 'What would Jesus do?' As the text says: 'After Jesus had said this, he departed and hid from them.'

Response

'But with the woes of sin and strife
The world has suffered long
Beneath the angel strain have rolled two thousand years of wrong;
And man, at war with man, hears not
The love song which they bring;
O hush the noise, ye men of strife,
And hear the angels sing.'

This verse of Sear's hymn 'It came Upon a Midnight Clear' always spoke to me as a child and young adult. Is it a hymn you are familiar with? If you read the words again that are familiar to you (there's several versions) what stands out reading this in Holy Week rather than Advent? Do we find it easier to understand 'two thousand years of wrong' in Holy Week as we consider Christ's death and the story around his last days with his friends?

The words of this verse were re-written to say 'warring humankind hears not'. Does this change speak to you? What do you feel about the gendering of war as masculine by Sear (noting above that he wrote on the equality of men and women, but came from an age when 'man' would be heard and read in a different way from today). Will you view this hymn differently in future? Would you sing it at your Holy Week service tonight? Which version would you sing and why?

Prayer

O God of love and peace,
we call to you in a time of war.
We seek assurance that you hear our cries,
yet we know that even now the warring people hear not the songs of peace the
angels sing. Enable us, in our time, to find and seek peace,
even in the sounding of the war trumpets.
Amen