



*Mt 10:16 Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.*

What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?

The Memorial Church, Cambridge  
Rev'd Andrew James Brown - Christmas Day 2006

-oOo-

In his seminal "Critique of Pure Reason" the philosopher Kant asked three, very simple, questions which remain pertinent to us today. They were: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?

The birth of the Christ-Child which we celebrate this happy morning helps us answer these three questions - although I should be clear in saying that Kant wouldn't have agreed with all, or perhaps any of my answers.

So what can we know?

The story of the birth of the Christ-Child suggests that we know God best, not as some abstract set of first principles, but as lovingly and justly acting in and through the historical events of our world and in and through human hands. It is a story which says that, ultimately, all the events and people of the world are in some way suffused with deep spiritual meaning and worth which points towards an ultimate wholeness and peace. By saying this I don't mean to suggest that we can easily discern this deeper meaning in the simplistic manner believed by some religious fundamentalists; this is because the story reminds us to take time, that is historical time, seriously and to be patient with its unfolding. We must not be seduced into judging the whole story on the basis of any single event, not the joyous birth of the Christ-Child, not the massacre of the innocents, not the seeming failure of a life's work

and, of course, not even death itself whether that death is had on the cross at the hands of a corrupt political and religious leadership or in the horrific moment a dreadful natural disaster occurs. Taking time seriously and letting the Christian narrative unfold slowly within us each year we come to know the truth of those words we heard in our reading that, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). As we hear and see the seemingly endless roll-call of bad news on the radio and television remembering this becomes more and more vital. Remembering this helps us address the second of Kant's questions: What ought we to do?

The traditional Nativity scene - a concatenation of the different accounts found in Matthew and Luke - offers us some valuable and practical models. Like Mary and Joseph we must try to be the caring and loving parents who become channels of divinity into our world and who then lovingly care for and nurture it in whatever form it has become incarnate. Some of us parent children; some of us parent music, art, words, or flowers, whilst others parent friends, public institutions, churches or voluntary organizations.

Like the shepherds we must be prepared, at the appropriate time, to turn aside from our daily tasks and acknowledge that, ultimately, our loyalty is to something far greater than those powers and principalities which are merely transient.

Like the Wise Men we must be prepared freely to give something of value to that which we acknowledge is greater than ourselves. Whatever we give, whether money or time, it must be given selflessly and with no thought of reward.

And, lastly, let us not fail to notice that in the Christ-Child we encounter the wonderful and profound paradox that our ultimate concern - God himself - is to be found in the weakest and most vulnerable of forms - a new born babe. So we must learn to understand that, sometimes, that which is greater than us appears small and vulnerable.

There are many other things one could learn from the characters who surround the crib but like them all we must be prepared to give thanks and praise to God who is to us all things. And so, as a people of faith, all our actions must begin in prayer and worship.

And lastly, what may we hope?

Well we may hope that nothing is lost. Elsewhere in the Gospel of John (6:12) after the feeding of the five thousand Jesus said to his disciples, "Gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost." The Christian story taken as a whole assures us that, in time, all the fragments of the world's existence will be gathered up and brought to healing and wholeness. Now I am not, this morning anyway, going to offer any complex rational philosophical defence of this claim - although I think it is possible to do this to a limited degree. Instead I simply observe that we are brought to faith, not merely by rational arguments, but by the complex interplay of lives lived and woven together through history, culture and personal experience and that complex is always best presented as a narrative, as story. I believe, with all my heart that, taken as a whole, the story of Christmas is true and, as I have claimed each Christmas of my ministry, if we want to find the Christ-Child in the crib this happy morn then we too must enter the story - not as critical rationalists - but as faithful human beings gathering around the light that shines in the darkness, and which the darkness never has, nor will ever, overcome. Happy Christmas to you all. Amen.