

Rod Prince

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 7: 10-15. Matthew 1: 18-23

Evensong

Grant O Lord that in the written word and through the spoken word we may behold the true and living word our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ

Tonight I wish to pay tribute to a man who has brought me Joy, hope, laughter and insight – a good definition for a holy man. I refer to that doyen of "Thought for today" Rabbi Lionel Blue.

As we stand on the cusp of Christmas, who better to share it with than a member of the Jewish faith. But first, and in line with Rabbi Lionel's practice let me begin with one of his jokes:

An old Jewish man was hit by a bus. A nice nurse put a pillow under his head and asked, "Are you comfortable, Mr Cohen?" "I make a living, nurse", he whispered reassuringly. "I make a living".

Christmas is a time for celebrating our humanity. And it is this aspect that I want to think about tonight. The Antiphon for tonight is O Emmanuel, God with us. There are 7 antiphons and each one is a name for Jesus. In the Church of England they have held pride of place by inclusion in the Calendar of The Book of Common Prayer. But I digress. Humanity and God with us. You cannot pick up the Church Times or other worthy religious publications without being exhorted, shamed into or summoned to Search for God. Hunting for God is the thing that Christians are told to do.

Well here is a story by Jeffrey Newman told by Rabbi Lionel:

A man was going from village to village, everywhere asking the same question "Where can I find God?" He journeyed from rabbi to rabbi, and nowhere was he satisfied with the answers he received, so quickly he would pack his bags, and hurry on to the next village. Some of the rabbis replied, "Pray my son, and you shall find Him". But the man had tried to pray, and knew that he could not. And some replied "Study, my child, and you shall find Him". But the more he read, the more confused he became, and the further he seemed from God. And some replied, "Forget your quest, my child, God is within you". But the man had tried to find God within himself, and failed.

One day, the man arrived wearily at a very small village set in the middle of a forest. He went up to a woman who was minding some chickens, and she asked whom he could be looking for in such a small place, but she did not seem surprised when he told her that he was looking for God. She showed him to the Rabbi's house.

When he went in, the Rabbi was studying. He waited a moment, but he was impatient to be off to the next village, if he could not be satisfied. Then he interrupted, "Rabbi – how do I find God?" The Rabbi paused, and the man wondered which of the many answers he had already received he would be told this time. But the Rabbi simply said "You have come to the right place, my child, God is in this village. Why don't you stay a few days; you might meet Him". The man was puzzled. He did not understand what the Rabbi could mean. But the answer was unusual, and so he stayed. For two or three days he strode round and round, asking all the villagers where God was that morning, but they would only smile, and ask him to have a meal with them. Gradually, he got to know them, and even helped with some of the village work. Every now and then he would see the Rabbi by chance and the Rabbi would ask him "Have you met God yet, my son?" and the man would smile, and sometimes he understood and sometimes he did not understand. For months he stayed in the village, and then for years. He became part of the village and shared in all its life. He went with the men to the synagogue on Friday and prayed with the rest of them, and sometimes he knew why he prayed and sometimes he didn't. And sometimes he really said prayers, and sometimes only words. And then he would return with one of the men for a Friday night meal, and when they talked about God, he was always assured that God was in the village, though he wasn't quite sure where or when He could be found. Gradually, too, he began to believe that God was in the village, though he wasn't quite sure where. He knew, however, that sometimes he had met Him.

One day, for the first time, the Rabbi came to him and said, "You have met God now, have you not?" And the man said "Thank you Rabbi, I think that I have. But I am not sure why I met Him or how or when. And why is He in this village only?"

So the Rabbi replied, "God is not a person, my child, nor a thing. You cannot meet Him in that way. When you came to our village, you were so worried by your question that you could not recognize an answer when you heard it. Nor could you recognize God when you met Him, because you were not really

looking for Him. Now you have stopped persecuting God, you have found Him, and now you can return to your town if you wish.”

So, the man went back to his town, and God went with him. And the man enjoyed studying and praying and he knew that God was within himself and within other people. And other people knew it too, and sometimes they would ask him “Where can we find God?” And the man would always answer, “You have come to the right spot. God is in this place”.

Emmanuel – God with us. Very often when we say that we are seeking God, what we are really doing is running away and when we bury ourselves in religious texts we are hiding from Him.

The message of Christmas is that God came among us. He entered, as all humans enter the world, born of a woman. He lived with us sharing the dirt and the disease, the poverty, the oppression, the sadness and yes, the joy, the laughter and the love that is humanity. He lived with persecution and injustice and died the victim of cruelty. There is not one single human emotion that our Lord has not experienced and shared with us. His Spirit is with us still.

So this Christmas let us just be at peace and witness Him with us in the faces of our family and friends, in the suffering of the poor and the hungry, in the refugee and the persecuted, in the laughter of children and adults in hugs and kisses, in tears and regrets. Christmas is a celebration of humanity and God in humanity and with humanity.

And let us give thanks for men of God like Rabbi Lionel Blue who by their humanity point us to God.