

ST NINIAN'S POLLOKSHIELDS
POETRY IN ADVENT – WK 4
COMING

Yesterday was my day off. Which means that after I fought the holiday shopping crowd, I sat with the cats for an hour before writing two sermons, two service sheets, and made a stab at annotating the Windsor Report so that it might seem comprehensible.

There is so much that clamours for our attention at this time of year. And the nearer we get to Christmas the worse it gets. I know there are a few people here who are probably organized – and I know of at least one member of the congregation who was wrapping presents in July. But for the rest of us, the temptation at this stage is to settle for what is easy rather than what is desirable. We reach for the small things that seem to be to hand, rather than the big thing – the perfect gift, the hand-made card – or even: the giving of ourselves in a relaxed enough state that we are actually worth spending time with.

All that we do, all the small things we feel bound to this season, can so easily get in the way of our encounter with something deeper.

And it was with that in mind that I sat down with this poem:

Answers

I kept my answers small and kept them near:
Big questions bruised my mind but still I let
Small answers be a bulwark to my fear.

The huge abstractions I kept from the light;
Small things I handled and caressed and loved.
I let the stars assume the whole of night.

But the big answers clamoured to be moved
Into my life. Their great audacity
Shouted to be acknowledged and believed

Even when all small answers build up to
Protections of my spirit, still I hear
Big answers striving for their overthrow

And all the great conclusions coming near.

-- Elizabeth Jennings

I don't pretend for a moment that Jennings is talking about Christmas. Her 'small things' are not Christmas crackers, and mince pies and pretty packages. And I can't say with any surety that she means for her big answers to point us to God – though other poems of hers suggest she might. But reading this poem, at this moment, here is what I see.

Jennings taps into the difficulty of the 'huge abstractions' of life. Words like Truth, Love, Beauty. Or even words like 'God'.. So much easier to keep them at bay by surrounding ourselves with little things – a favourite carol, a favourite liturgical moment, the

business of coffee mornings and Christmas shopping. We let small things stand as a bulwark to our fear. Are we sure? Is it true? Is this really Christ among us?

And it is the small things we caress and love – clinging to that which we can touch, that which we can shape and mould. That we can control.

But the big answers keep clamouring – keep vying for our attention.

A friend wrote recently that in the incarnation God comes to us ‘as the only thing in the world which cannot ultimately be ignored - a screaming child.’ The great God of heaven, the one who is utterly beyond our holding, or comprehension, or control – comes in this vulnerable infant. A small thing, clamouring for our attention. Refusing to be ignored.

So maybe the incarnation tells us that small things are enough? That we can let the ‘stars assume the whole of night?’

Surely we can – if we see the image as turning to light and not darkness. As attending to what is there, rather than getting lost in what is beyond us.

But still we need to heed Jennings’s warning—little things can block the big things. Solidity can obstruct truth.

Because in the incarnation, we do not simply have a screaming infant – one we can touch, and influence, and control. And this is not simply the birth of a remarkable child – a great man.

But in this birth, God himself is with us.

All creation finds its course.

The incarnate child holds within him the unfathomable depths of God – the whole span of the heavens, and not just the light of the stars.

In that birth, the big answers clamour for our attention:
we are faced not only with a child
or even with God's gift of himself in Love
but with God's Judgement –
who are we in relation to the One who comes among us?
How will we respond when God shouts to be acknowledged and believed?

As Christmas rushes towards us – we confront the judgement of the One who comes.

Will we rest content with small answers?
Let the little things of Christmas – all the gifts, and food, and gatherings—be an end in themselves?

Or will we let the big answers overthrow our idolatry?
Find meaning beyond the immediate, beyond the things we touch, and shape, and control.

If we can let go of the little things long enough
to let the wonder in –
if we let ourselves be startled and changed
by the presence of God in our midst
Then the little things will be returned to us too:

our love and self-offering made tangible in the gifts we offer
our willingness to make space for one another
made clear in the time we spend preparing the turkey and baring
patiently with the relative who most annoys us round the table.

In the incarnation we learn not to let the small things lock us in,
but see them as a sign of the great conclusion coming near.