

## **You May Fear too Far** **ChristMass Day 2018**

Albany            Well, you may fear too far  
Goneril           Safer than trust too far.

*King Lear Act 1 Scene 4 lines 328-9*

This brief exchange between a husband and wife sums up the nature of Christmass: 'You may fear too far. 'Safer than trust too far.'

Husband and wife are at odds with each other; they have totally different approaches to life; they are both characters in a play and as the play develops it becomes plain that one represents the Christian faith and the other the opposite. The characters are from Shakespeare's *King Lear* and the Christian approach is expressed by the Duke of Albany: 'You may fear too far.' The opposite is expressed by his wife, Goneril, who is also the daughter of King Lear: 'Safer than trust too far.'

This disagreement concerns the treatment of Goneril's father, King Lear, who is a very healthy but rather foolish old man, who rewards flattery and punishes honesty, entrusts himself to his hypocritical, flattering daughters and banishes the honest, blunt one. He entrusts his kingdom to his two flattering daughters and announces that he will devote himself to hunting, wining and dining, living in turn with each daughter. The two daughters pretty quickly decide between themselves that they will not tolerate their father and within days Goneril is ready to chuck him out. Lear's son-in-law, the Duke of Albany, is the only person with any kind of power or authority who raises any objection to Goneril's drastic action: 'you may fear too far.' He is immediately rebuffed by his wife: 'Safer than trust too far.' If it had been left to Goneril there would have been no first ChristMass. At the heart of ChristMass is trust and the putting aside of fear.

I don't think those who were part of the first ChristMass story would have understood just how profoundly true that is. Not even the first three Gospel writers, Mark, Matthew or Luke, understood what an amazing act of trust took place in the first ChristMass. It was John, the fourth gospel writer, who expressed it so well:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.  
And the Word became flesh and lived among us,  
and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son,  
full of grace and truth.

John 1:1,14

To paraphrase and précis, what John says is, God became human.

For us it is commonplace to refer to Jesus as 'the Word.' But for first century Jews the Word was the companion of the Father who had been with him since the beginning of creation and had, indeed shared in the act of creation. He was above all the suffering and anxiety of human life. There was no compulsion on him to become human. But he did. God became human. It is difficult to think of an image which captures what a radical and complete commitment this was. But let me try!

A few years ago I visited the Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida. As we were told about the lengthy preparation and training given to astronauts, I was struck by the depth of their trust in those who controlled the flight from Mission Control. Once they set foot into the space rocket there was no going back and there was no guarantee of a safe return. Astronauts have died in space; others have died on the launch pad. I even asked our guide what would happen if, at the very last minute, one of them changed his mind. I was given a very firm reply: changing one's mind was not an option for an astronaut. As they entered the space capsule every one of them must have been very aware that he might never see his family again.

We might suppose that similar feelings were experienced by the Word of God as he prepared to become incarnate. He was the creator of the whole world, he was Lord of Heaven and earth, and he was about to enter the womb of a woman and experience all the risks of pregnancy, childbirth, life in first century Palestine - and death.

Paul puts it like this:

Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited,  
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form, he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

Philippians 2:2-8

If the Word of God had listened to the advice of King Lear's daughter he would have stayed in heaven. There would have been no ChristMass; no Good Friday; No Easter Sunday.

We should not be surprised that the Word of God was willing to take this risk. Let us go back to the prophet Isaiah, writing some five hundred years before Jesus. The reading we have just heard is full of joy as God enters his world. But both before and after that passage there are darker ones; passages which show that God's messenger knows the risks he is running and is willing to take them:

I gave my back to those who struck me,  
and my cheeks to those who pulled out the beard;  
I did not hide my face from insult and spitting.

Isaiah 50:6

Isaiah clearly shared Albany's view that 'you may fear too far'.

But Jesus made it clear in his teaching that following him was about putting aside fear and learning to trust. When he told the parable of the talents he rebuked the man who hid his money safely in the ground and gave it back to his master. His praise was reserved for those who traded and took risks.

He trod dangerously in a more direct manner:

You snakes! You brood of vipers!  
How will you escape being condemned to hell?

Matthew 23:33

These harsh words were not addressed to his disciples or to people dependent on him but to the Pharisees and religious leaders, people who had the power to exact vengeance and retribution. He was running a risk.

But the risk taking run by Jesus, whether as a wandering preacher in Galilee or as the Word of God in heaven is more than bravado. The risks were taken in the belief that his Father in Heaven was with him. This did not mean that he was spared humiliation; this did not mean that he was spared torture and execution. But the end is described again by Paul in his letter to the Philippians:

Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name that is above every name,  
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

Philippians 2:9-11

So what risk will you take? Probably not to be an astronaut! But perhaps there is someone you find difficult you need to make up with; perhaps there is someone you need to speak to. I do not know the details of your life. I do not know what you fear; I do not know where you need to step out in faith. But each one of us needs to know that taking risks and casting out fear is the heart of Christmas.

But risk taking and trust is also about the world of politics. Our departure from the European Union is the climax of many decades of fear and fear mongering. The public British attitude to the European Union has been for many decades that it is safer to fear than to trust, Perhaps it is not surprising that the relationship has broken down. Perhaps we should pray for our political leaders that they will commit themselves to trust a little more and fear a little less.

And what of the husband and wife with whom we began? What of the Duke of Albany who warned against fear and his wife who despised trust? There follows a great deal of death – Lear, his one faithful daughter and his two unfaithful daughters. The one who survives and becomes king is the Duke of Albany, the one who represents Christ himself is the one who inherits the throne. It is trustfulness which is vindicated and fear which is banished. Perhaps the story of King Lear is a parable of the Christian story.

N Clews