

At this instant of our lives

St. Brandon's

Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-4; John 1:1-14

24th December 2018

Truly, though our element is time,
We are not suited to the long perspectives
Open at each instant of our lives.

Those are lines from Philip Larkin's poem 'Reference Back'. They recall times spent with his mother after his father had died. They were generally, to him, unsatisfactory visits, even though his mother seemed to appreciate and look forward to them. But they made him look back to better times (hence the long perspective), and wonder whether "by acting differently" he / we could somehow "have kept it so". But ...

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I imagine that you are like me, and like Philip Larkin, in not being able to hold onto the long perspective at each instant of your life. Each instant is full of now, of things that need to be done now, but also of distractions, of things that have just happened, or things that are about to happen, rather than the long perspective. The author of one of the Christmas letters we received used the word, if it is a word, 'frazzlement' to describe how she felt. We might sympathise with that.

But at this instant of our lives, here, now, we're invited to consider long perspectives – indeed very long perspectives, way further back than Philip Larkin was thinking of. "In the beginning", says the opening of St John's Gospel. In other words even before time began, before the creation as we experience it, in the beginning was God and the Word of God, who we understand to be Jesus Christ, through whom creation, and indeed time, came into being.

Then we're invited to consider a more recent event, though still a long perspective looking back: this Word, this Christ, through whom creation came into being, "became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth", or, as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews put it "in these last days, God has spoken to us by a Son".

In this instant of our lives, here, now, we're invited to take in the long perspectives looking back, to set our lives in that context.

Our reading from Isaiah, however, starts with the present, with a particular instant of his life: a "messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says, "Your God reigns" – all present tense, all now, at that instant in that part of Isaiah's life and Israel's history. And then Isaiah also looks back: "the Lord has comforted his people, has redeemed Jerusalem ... has bared his holy arm" – Isaiah also takes the long perspective looking back. But then, Isaiah offers us something else, something we haven't considered yet, which is a long perspective looking forward: "and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God". All

those long perspectives looking back, setting a context for what God was doing in Isaiah's life and in the life of Israel at that instant, make sense only if there is the long perspective looking forward to God's salvation coming to all the ends of the earth.

In this instant of our lives, here, now, we're invited to take in the long perspective looking forward, to set our lives in that context too.

In a world here, now in which the very future of civilization as we know it is under threat from climate change; in a world in which geo-political machinations and actions make it feel, and for many actually be an unsafe and even hellish world; in a country which faces a very uncertain near and quite possibly medium-term future; and in whatever may be going on in your life at present, or in the lives of those close to you; if and however we experience the 'frazzlement' of now – we're still invited at this instant of our lives, here, now, to take in the long perspectives looking back and looking forward.

And we're invited at this instant of our lives, here, now to try to believe and then to try to live out three things. First, that the God who, through His Word, created all things in the beginning, still "sustains all things by his powerful word", as it says in Hebrews. In other words, underneath are the everlasting arms, and whatever happens in and to the world in the future will not happen outside of God's sustaining love.

Second, that through the Word made flesh, in other words in Jesus, we have become, can become if you so choose, children of God, born of the will of God, as it says in John's Gospel. In other words, at a personal level, nothing can separate us from the love of God; we are His adopted children; He will not let us go; our future is secure in Him.

And the third thing we're invited to try to believe and then to try to live out is that these long perspectives and what they mean for us here, now are not just for this instant of our lives but, as Larkin said, they are open at each instant of our lives. These are, in other words, for life, not just for Christmas.

Amen