

Fourth Sunday after Advent

20/12/15

“Joseph, Mary and the issue of the baby...”

I speak in the name of Jesus the Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.

I am not yet born; O hear me.
Let not the bloodsucking bat or the rat or the stoat or the club-footed ghoul come near me.

I am not yet born, console me.
I fear that the human race may with tall walls wall me,
with strong drugs dope me, with wise lies lure me,
on black racks rack me, in blood-baths roll me.

I am not yet born; provide me
With water to dandle me, grass to grow for me, trees to talk
to me, sky to sing to me, birds and a white light
in the back of my mind to guide me.

I am not yet born; forgive me
For the sins that in me the world shall commit, my words
when they speak me, my thoughts when they think me,
my treason engendered by traitors beyond me,
my life when they murder by means of my
hands, my death when they live me.

I am not yet born; rehearse me
In the parts I must play and the cues I must take when
old men lecture me, bureaucrats hector me, mountains
frown at me, lovers laugh at me, the white
waves call me to folly and the desert calls
me to doom and the beggar refuses
my gift and my children curse me.

I am not yet born; O hear me,
Let not the man who is beast or who thinks he is God
come near me.

I am not yet born; O fill me
With strength against those who would freeze my
humanity, would dragoon me into a lethal automaton,
would make me a cog in a machine, a thing with
one face, a thing, and against all those
who would dissipate my entirety, would
blow me like thistledown hither and
thither or hither and thither
like water held in the
hands would spill me.

Let them not make me a stone and let them not spill me.
Otherwise kill me.

Louis Macneice

In my final year at Rhodes University in Grahamstown whilst completing my Divinity degree, I was given the opportunity to complete a course in Ethics. This was a sub-course of my major in Systematic Theology. The course in Ethics was exciting as it seemed relevant and real to life. It attempted to define the complexities around how ethics and mores work in life, both from a philosophical and a practical point of view. As a class, we looked at various scenarios that demanded an ethical stance, like for example, euthanasia, issues around sexuality, condoned violence (this one was particularly interesting as Liberation Theology had recently emerged, as well as the film entitled “The Mission” – it made for some lively debates, that I can assure you of!)

One of the ethical issues that was also raised was the issue of termination of pregnancy, or abortion.

I have to admit, with greatest humility, that being in my early twenties at the time, whilst I engaged with the issues from an academic point of view; I was too young to fully appreciate the intricacies and complexities that go hand-in-hand with the problems that ethics tries to address.

It took a lifetime of pain and struggle in my personal life to even begin to understand how complicated ethics in society can be, never mind our personal lives and never mind trying to lead a Christian life as well!

This year has been a challenging one for me on a personal level in many ways.

You may laugh, but I went through the drama of changing cars and choosing the wrong one for my daily drive to work in traffic. This can be quite stressful for some men! I admit, I think I am one of those men where life is perceived as too short to be unhappy with the car you drive.

Secondly, I have made the adjustment to ministering at St Paul's. This has also been a challenge for me as not only had I spent the good part of fifteen years at my previous parish, but I also became very used to the Anglo-Catholic Tradition. So whilst I have enjoyed my placement time here at St Paul's, it has also been a massive learning curve for me and that in itself presents stress.

Thirdly, I have been made very aware of the issue of abortion in our society over this last year. This has been a journey for me as well. Whilst I knew about the ethics surrounding abortion, I had never engaged with it at a personal level, it was always from a distance and perhaps, at an academic level.

This year, I was confronted by a close friend who found herself pregnant. She was a single working mother with three grown up children and try as she might, she could just not see her way forward to have the baby... issues like finance, logistics, being single, quality of life going forward all tumbled from her lips... I understood immediately that this was a very difficult decision for her to make... I also realised in a flash that studying ethics from a clinical page in a book, and dealing with the trauma of an ethical decision in real life are two very different things...

What this incident did do in my personal life, was to sensitise the complexities of abortion to me in a very real and striking manner. I do believe that God had His hand on me during this time and I do believe that it has made me a better Priest... a Priest more aware of how people around me may struggle with many issues that often, we as a church fail to talk about and address in a pragmatic way. (But that is a discussion for another day)

I suddenly remembered the basics around the abortion debate that I teach my Grade Seven Bible Studies class every year as I attempt to bring them up to speed with the many social issues in our society.

There are two essential arguments around abortion:

The first argument can be broadly labelled as Pro-Life:

Here, the understanding is that all life is God-given and thus must be protected at all costs. A person who believes in Pro-Life, is often religious, but does not have to be. A Pro-Lifer believes that there is no real circumstance in which abortion can be justified; the life of the child must always be put first. (There are some extenuating circumstances which we will look at just now) A Pro-Lifer then would logically conclude that to commit abortion is to commit a sin as you are essentially taking a life. A complexity with this argument is the age old question: At what exact point is the living foetus now a human being with a soul? There are various arguments around this, both from a legal and a medical point of view. This is not the place for such detail, but I would urge you to do some private reading around the matter and become more aware of the issues our society face every day.

The second argument around abortion is a stance entitled, Pro-Choice:

Here people feel that being a democratic world with rights, it must always be the right of the mother to decide whether or not to bear a child. Thus the ultimate decision lies with the mother. It is thus her constitutional right to decide. It is interesting to note that most governments in the developed world have protected this right constitutionally and thus ensured women the right to a safe abortion without judgement.

So these are essentially the two arguments.

There are some extenuating factors I think we should all be aware of:

Firstly: It has been argued that in cases of incest and rape, abortion on demand is within the confines of the law and ethically justifiable. The question is how would a Pro-Life person respond to this scenario?

Secondly: It is widely accepted practice that if a mother's life is endangered, then an abortion is ethically justifiable.

Thirdly, and this is an interesting development, I gathered from my research on the subject that many medical doctors initially refused to provide medical abortion procedures... until they saw so many women arriving at their hospitals suffering massive internal injury from illegal abortions... they then realised that they had no choice but to provide a safe alternative and thus essentially save their patient's lives.

At the end of the day, I understand that issues around abortion are both highly emotive and personal.

There may be women and men sitting right here in our parish this morning who have been affected by this, just like I have.

My calling as a Priest, is NOT to judge, take sides or to promote the Pro-Life or Pro-Choice argument. My calling is to listen to the journeys of my people, to be there for them during their hour of need, to provide support, a shoulder to cry on, a soul to pray with and a father in the faith during trying times. My calling as a Priest is also to enlighten you and keep you aware of the social issues that we face. This is being a responsible and practical Christian.

After Mass this morning I will be lighting four candles:

I will be lighting one candle for all the mothers who have had an abortion in the past.

I will be lighting a candle for all those mothers who are currently struggling with the decision.

I will be lighting a candle for all the unborn.

I will also be lighting a candle for all the medical staff.

Louis Macneice summed it up beautifully in his poem, "Prayer before birth".

Perhaps we as a society need to be more mindful of ensuring that our children receive the correct education regarding responsible sexuality.

Perhaps we as a church need to be open to discussing the issues around us and providing more open support to those who are battling with complex ethical decisions.

As we approach Christmas in the week to come and all the New Hope that this represents for us as Christians, I can't help but ask the question to myself:

"What would have happened if Mary had decided not to have baby Jesus?"

May God bless you this week ahead as we await in joy for the arrival of our King.

Amen.