

Christmas 2020, rcl yr a
St. John's in pandemic
Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14 ,Luke 2:1-13

*to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour,
who is the Messiah, the Lord.*

Enn Tarto—the Estonian dissident—was sent to prison three times for his political activity in Soviet-era Estonia. The first time was in the fifties, when he was 18, and it was for being part of underground Estonian youth groups and for being a vocal supporter of the Hungarian Revolution. The second time he was sent to prison was from 1962 to 1967.

But it was the third time that was harshest. In 1984, Tarto was declared a political prisoner by the Supreme Court of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic and was sent to a prison work camp in Perm, Russia called Perm-36—he was sent to the Gulag, for what the Soviets called “rehabilitative hard labour.” In this camp, they wore stripes. Tarto, not mincing words, called it a death camp.

He tells a story about how they celebrated Christmas in Perm-36. Most years, he writes, the guards didn't interfere with Christmas, and so along with his cell-mates—an Armenian dissident, a Ukrainian poet, and a Ukrainian priest—they would find some fir branches and candles, and celebrate a modest Christmas of songs and prayers.

One year, though, at Perm-36 while he was there, the guards decided to crack down on Christmas. So they confiscated the fir branches and candles of their already modest celebration.

But Tarto and his cellmates were resourceful. They insisted that Christmas would be celebrated, and they found a tiny finger-length branch of fir, despite the guards. They put a wick made of thread cut from a tent into a dab of margarine on a piece of foil, and made a makeshift candle. And so they began an even humbler celebration than in other years in the camp. They lit their margarine candle by the tiny fir branch; the priest sang; and they prayed together.

But the guards still would not have it, not that year. Once they realized what was happening, they barged into the cell, trampled their small piece of greenery and their makeshift candle, swept it all up and carried it out the door, yelling, as Tarto tells it, that “home made candles were strictly

forbidden, that everything was forbidden, even singing, that [they] should sit in silence and be with [their] God in spirit and thought, and that God doesn't really exist anyway."

So what do you do when your traditions are altered, or changed completely, in ways you wouldn't choose for yourself? When even your humbler than usual Gulag Christmas is taken away? When you don't even have a margarine candle, or a contraband branch of evergreen, and you're yelled at by atheist guards that your God doesn't exist, telling you that you aren't even allowed to sing?

I'll let Tarto tell you, in his own words, what they did in their cell: "Thus we sat silently, spoke quietly, listened to [the priest] read religious verse, prayed and held our Christmas."

* * *

So why tell this story? Well, I'm *not* telling this story because it's one of human strength and toughness of spirit. Though it is all that. Nor do I tell it as a way to say, "sure this Christmas is hard. But others have had it harder, and still found a way to celebrate." Though that is also most certainly true. No, I tell this story because it illustrates something about the gospel: that there is nothing in this world that can "defeat God's purposes or thwart the coming of his kingdom." Not human complacency, not secularity, not political oppression, not COVID—not even the Gulag can "defeat God's purposes or thwart the coming of his kingdom."

There is much good about Christmas: roaring fires, trees and presents, festive food and drink, singing, late nights at church, and togetherness with loved ones. But that's not *what* we celebrate. That's *how* we celebrate. And when we get a firm grasp on *what* we celebrate, the *how* can become a bit more flexible. And *what* we are celebrating is the birth of our Lord, the Feast of the Incarnation: we celebrate that God's purposes cannot be thwarted, by anything. And that God's kingdom is established anew in Bethlehem: that to you is born in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

* * *

Our reading from Luke takes the time to tell us that “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.” Why such political details? Things like, who was Emperor, who was governor of Syria? Why not just get to the good stuff? Babies and shepherds and animals and angels!

Well, it's partly to say that the incarnation takes place in a real time, in a real place, and in a real political environment. It also describes a time of hardship. Mary and Joseph were on the road, because some far-away ruler decided he wanted to increase his tax revenue.

And thus we are reminded that the region in which Mary and Joseph find themselves is a territory occupied by a foreign power. We are reminded that it is in that time, there, that a Saviour, the Messiah, the Lord is born—and not in a sunny beach-house to Instagram-ready celebrity socialites, not in the corridors of a corrupt or even of a benevolent political regime, but in the harsh conditions of travel, taxation, and occupation. As if God wants to say, by choosing this time, that there is *nothing*, no hardship nor earthly powers, that can “defeat God's purposes or thwart the coming of his kingdom.”

I've stolen that sentence from the Eastern Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart. It's from an interview he gave to the Christian Century about a book he had written about the tsunami that took place on Boxing day in 2004. And I mention it here because in that interview Hart digs even deeper into what the gospel declares.

“The gospel of the ancient church” says Hart, “was always one of rebellion against those principalities and powers—death chief among them—that enslave and torment creation.” It's not just the world of politics that can be cruel, and display so keenly that humanity is fallen and sinful—whether that be shown by guards in a Gulag prison cell, or by an empire willing to put a pregnant woman on a harsh road in order to increase tax revenue.

Yes, the cruelest political regimes of this world “cannot defeat God's purposes or thwart the coming of his kingdom.” But neither can a fallen and

sometimes cruel natural world, a world of tsunami and pandemic, sickness and death. Or at least, that's the claim made in the gospel; and that's part of *what* we celebrate on Christmas: that the one who would put the principalities and powers under his feet, and defeat death itself, "is born this day in the city of David[,] a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

This is *what* we celebrate: that the battle with the cruelest of powers, including sickness and death, begins in earnest on this day.

And so knowing this, that "born ... in the city of David [is] a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord," means *how* we celebrate Christmas can become a bit more accommodating to where we find ourselves. The first Christmas was celebrated in a stranger's back room with strangers, after a long and difficult journey. In Bethlehem, the kingdom had come.

And Christmas can be celebrated even in a prison cell, even after your extremely modest celebration becomes even more modest when your shred of evergreen and your margarine candle are taken away, leaving you not even with singing, but with only a with a cellmate reading religious verse. Even there in the Gulag, is kingdom come.

In whatever condition you're in, wherever you are, hear this: what we are celebrating now is that there is nothing, nothing at all, from the cruelest of tyrants to the meanest of viruses, that can defeat God's purposes or thwart the coming of his kingdom: none of this can change that "to you is born [...] in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

The Revd Dr Preston DS Parsons