

Fellow Fetuses

by Gilbert Meilaender

*Speak yourself on behalf of the dumb,
on behalf of all the unwanted;
speak yourself, pronounce a just verdict,
and uphold the rights of the poor, of the needy.*
PROVERBS 31:8-9

It was on January 22, 1973, that the Supreme Court of our country, in the *Roe v. Wade* decision, gave legal sanction to a permissive abortion policy. The toll of abortions in this country since that January day more than a quarter century ago reaches well into the millions - reason enough for Christians to be concerned. There are, to be sure, many others besides the unborn who are in need of our concern, but we are not wrong today to permit the words of the Israelite sage to invite us to think together about abortion.

The Epiphany glory of the child - the child! - in the manger shines into our world through the words and deeds of those who have come to kneel and worship. And through when we open our mouths and speak on behalf of those who are unwanted and unable to speak for themselves. In their time of need, the Body of Christ must be the epiphany of God in our world.

Still, some things should be preached and others taught. A sermon is not the place to sort through every difficult case that comes along, nor is it the place to resolve the complexities of moral decision-making. But a sermon is the place to consider what it means that we should be the epiphany of God in a culture for which abortion has become everyday and commonplace.

We should, first, understand a little of what is at stake. The abortion controversy in this country will not go away one day soon. There will continue to be conflict - and, even, violence. For at no time in our history since the Civil War have we confronted an issue in which the very definition of ourselves as a people has been so directly involved. We are arguing about whose good counts in the common good we share. Does the fetus also count? How inclusive - or how narrow - are the boundaries of the human community among us?

To understand that this is the question is to realize that we Christians are not without insight. Perhaps the simplest and most striking way to state our insight is to say, as Paul Ramsey once did: We are - all of us - fellow fetuses. All without the ability to speak for ourselves in the court that really counts - before God. All in need of a Vindicator to speak on our behalf. All without claims or achievements that count for anything in that divine court - and eagerly seeking a Defender who will, on our behalf, uphold the poor and needy.

When we think of the central themes of the Bible, we do not usually start with the Book of Proverbs. Yet, if the Bible has any central theme at all, it is one not far removed from the passage with which we began. God is a God who acts to deliver those who cannot save themselves. This God - who set his hand upon Israel, upon Mary, and upon the child born to her - is no respecter of persons. Strong or weak, valued or unwanted, it makes little difference to this God.

If we seek to be the epiphany of God in our world, we must be radically ill at ease when worth is measured in terms of achievement, or mental capacity, or power, or whether someone else wants us. To know ourselves as fellow fetuses must mean that we will be very reluctant indeed to narrow the bounds of the human community among us. That is the first insight Christian vision offers.

But there is also a second truth that we should see. Moved by our hope and trust in God, determined to be

his epiphany in the world, we must seek to become people who are eager to receive children into the human family. We do not want to find ourselves on Herod's side. Madeleine L'Engle has powerfully expressed this truth in her poem, "The Risk of Birth."

This is no time for a child to be born
With the earth betrayed by war & hate
And a nova lighting the sky to warn
That time runs out & the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honour & truth were trampled by scorn-
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by greed & pride the sky is torn-
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

G. K. Chesterton once pointed out that we should not underestimate the power of the Christmas story to shape Christian life and thought. Those pictures we have seen since we were young children..... those stories we have heard time and againall ringing the changes on that single mysterious theme: "that the hands that made the sun and stars were too small to reach the huge heads of the cattle." The hands of God were poor and needy when given into the care of Mary and Joseph; they are poor and needy still when given into our care.

The divine blessing spoken at the creation - "be fruitful and multiply" - continues to be effective in our world. And the presence of children is a sign of God's continuing "yes" to his creation, testimony that he will not withdraw from the time and history in which he has become incarnate. We welcome children into our midst therefore and speak on behalf of the unwanted not because we can protect them from all the dangers of life, not because they are such lovable little things, not because their potential is great - but in order to be in this world the epiphany of the God who came to us as Mary's child..

Such an attitude may not seem rational to all our neighbors, but it reflects the deeper mystery of God's own reason. For, as Madeleine L'Engle put it in another of her poems of the incarnation:

This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild..
Had Mary been filled with reason
There'd have been no room for the child.

And, hence, whatever the complexities of moral decision-making, whatever our hopes and fears in a troubled world, whatever reasons our too-fearful reason may put forward, we fellow fetuses - Christ's Body in our world - should not forget that "Love still takes the risk of birth." Love bestows worth upon the weak and unwanted; love speaks on behalf of the child in need. And we should not grow so old that we forget what it was like to be a child and to sing at Christmas: "Bless all the dear children in thy tender care."

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