

In the past 20 years or so, there's been this literary and philosophical movement called the "New Atheism" which is actually worse than the old atheism, in that it is arrogant in its rejection of God, dismissing believers in God as childish and naïve and even dangerous.

With the old atheists, at least you can have a conversation about the meaning of life and the order of the universe and all that, but these "new atheists" like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens (who has gone to the Lord, which I'm sure was a surprise to him), they won't even take a person of faith seriously at any level. Because as they say time and time again, religious people believe in fairy tales and fairy tales, while they can be entertaining, they are ultimately an evasion of life as it is, and an escape into a fantasy world that has nothing in common with the world as it is.

But we know better- as people of faith we know that God and faith and religion is not some fantasy that has nothing to do with the world. We know that faith has everything to do with real life, and as I'm sure you've heard and yourself said many times, if it's hard enough to live life with a sense of faith, how impossible it must be to live without any faith at all. And which is why St. Luke begins the Gospel passage we just heard- the setting of the stage for the preaching of John the Baptist- with all these obscure names and historical references. Because really- why should we care who was the governor and who was the tetrarch of this tiny region of the ancient world and why should we care what year it was in the reign of Caesar that John the Baptist appeared?

Luke wasn't trying to impress his readers with his knowledge of the political world of Galilee- what he was trying to do was to remind his readers/hearers that John and Jesus came among the people in a particular context- this wasn't some myth that had nothing to do with real

life and how people lived. By situating John and Jesus in the complex and disturbing circumstances of that time and place, Luke is saying that God did come among us in the messy details of our lives as humans. And that He did so freely and out of love and that this coming among us made all the difference for our world, then and now and in the future.

Not some god who is above it all and who sees humans only as things that can serve Him and do His bidding, but instead as our brother- as one of us- who entered the human condition not to condemn it but to redeem it and to bring humanity to where it should be- to bring humanity to where it deserves to be and where it can be if persons only repented of their sins and turned back to the Lord. And John was the one who set the stage for all that by reminding people that there was a better world to be had than the difficult and trying one they were stuck in- and it could be brought about by accepting this Messiah who has come into the world.

And of course it wasn't as easy as it sounds- it never is. That accepting of this Messiah who came into the world to redeem the world meant that the believer had to change their ways- they had to stop acting selfishly and instead think about God and the persons around them once in a while; they had to refuse to give in to a society that enabled and even encouraged them to act in those selfish ways; they had to choose to see the world in a different way.

Which is of course what we have to do. We know that the Messiah has come in the person of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, and that the world has changed because of that. But we have to do something with that knowledge. We have to choose to see the world in a different way than we so often do- not falling into despair because of the awful things that we hear about; instead, as well as acknowledging all the evil around us, also choosing to see the good all around us- the loving and selfless acts we ourselves do and that the people around us are

doing all the time- the quiet moments when the goodness of humanity shines through and you know more than ever that God is real and that God is alive and that He is right here with us.