

Christ Bearing Advent 4 – 18th December 2011

Readings:

Luke 1: 26-38

As a good Catholic boy growing up in Scotland one of the tasks I had to accomplish before I allowed to make my First Holy Communion was to be able to recite by heart the “Hail Mary.” How many of you know the prayer? At the time I learned it by rote, gabbled it off and paid little heed when saying the Rosary, and even today I can still gabble it:

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee; blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.

Now as a good Protestant I have trouble with the last bit of the prayer, for reasons I’ll not go into now. But the first part is pure biblical text, based on the angel Gabriel’s greeting to Mary that we heard in today’s gospel reading.

In one of the most beautiful scenes of Luke’s infancy narratives a heavenly angel meets a young woman, Mary. It almost calls for music and ballet or at the very least poetry. For we are not dealing here with historical fact as we understand it, we are dealing with the idea that if you have a remarkable human being there must be a remarkable birth story. In fact stories of remarkable births were very common in ancient times. There are birth legends surrounding the birth of the Buddha, and Krishna and in later centuries, Mohammed. And there is also a Babylonian myth that closely mirrors our Christmas stories. All of them designed to point out that it was no surprise that the various characters did great things given their births.

So Luke and Matthew, the only gospel writers to do so, create their mystical birth stories (incidentally different in many ways, but hardly surprising given that Matthew is writing to a Jewish audience well versed in their Scriptures, particularly the Prophetic books and Luke writing to a Gentile audience wishing to place Jesus’ birth fully into a Roman historical context).

So the ancient world is celebrating not so much a birth as a life. The Christmas stories are not really about a baby; they are about the person of the Christ. And to miss that is to miss the whole point of the birth stories.

And miss it we do when we attempt to read the stories as historic fact. They point to a deeper truth of the incarnation - God, not Santa, is coming to town, and the stories of God’s coming, his birth narratives, tell us more about the God we follow than anything else. A God who comes to a young woman in an occupied country, whose child is born into poverty, and is threatened by the powers that be and whose family become refugees. This surely is the point of the birth narratives, to point to a God who through the Christ favours the poor and vulnerable, the oppressed, and the homeless.

Is it any wonder that these stories are told of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth given his later life, death and resurrection.

But modern minds, schooled in the mechanisms of reproduction, must suspend their disbelief and enter the fantasy of the story. A virgin girl conceives, is overshadowed by an angel. The miracle begins. In this life God is to be found. She will receive the seed and bear the child. Undiluted divinity will flow through his life. We are light years away from talk of chromosomes and genetics, but we are celebrating the immanence of the God whom we, too, may meet in our moments of intimacy.

But sadly it hard for some to see the story as something other than literal truth. So theories of the virgin birth are reinvented, argued about, and explained. And in the explaining, whole theories about just how Mary and God managed the feat arise. Theories that have led to a reading of the passage that distort, disparaging human sexuality, as though virginity is somehow purer than a life fully engaged in sexual intimacy.

But not all the early church fathers missed the point. Take Augustine, he makes the remarkable claim that Mary conceived Christ through the ear!! Now I'm sure the Augustine, a real man of the world before he became a bishop, was not talking literally. He saw the birth of the Christ in spiritual terms. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." He also said that Mary conceived in heart before she conceived in her womb. Another jarring remark that points to the fact that the birthing of the Christ is a spiritual affair. And something that is not just restricted to Mary. Mary giving birth to the baby Jesus points us to another type of birth, a birthing of the Christ in us. That's what John's gospel is on about when it says, "... you must be born again."

But back to the text, Luke sets the story amid the cries of the Jewish people for liberation from Rome's oppression, Rome's forced 'peace'.

In Isaiah 7:14, 'A young woman shall conceive and bear a son and you shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us', Isaiah in his day offered a sign of deliverance for Judah from the threatening alliance of its northern compatriots of Israel with the Syrians. Here the sign has been recycled to point to a coming liberation from the Romans. At last God will save us! The world of Luke's infancy narratives is consistently one of faithful people crying out, often in nationalist terms, for liberation, awaiting a Messiah.

It's into such a world as this Jesus the Christ is born and is hailed as the Messiah. So to understand the birth narratives in Luke and in Matthew we need to look at the life of Jesus. According to Luke, Jesus' vision of the kingdom includes the good news of liberation from oppression: freedom!
It remains the vision and sets the agenda.

The romance of the story becomes water in the sand if we cannot connect it with the yearning of all people everywhere who cry out for justice. It becomes, indeed, too often a sentimentalised story that lulls us into acts of conspicuous excess, spending, drinking, and eating all in the name of celebrating the birth of the Christ. Could anything be further from the Christmas truth!

In the eyes of Mary we need to see the innocence and vulnerability of a twelve year old girl caught in a web of poverty and deprivation. We may catch a glimpse of her in TV reports from the 'two thirds world'. We may think of village girls forced into urban prostitution, to survive maybe 10 – 15 years with AIDS rather than die of starvation at home, or catch the hapless glance of the child labourer looking up, numbed, amid the glue fumes of the shoe workhouse.

Luke's Gospel seeks to deal with the grim reality of living. For him it is not **'Blessed are the poor in spirit'** (Matthew 5:3), but 'Blessed are the poor (the destitute)' (Luke 6:20) and Luke's Jesus from birth to resurrection reflects the need to enter into solidarity with the cries of the poor. That's why Jesus is born amidst the squalor of animal barn.

And whilst I love "Carols by Candlelight" and Christmas Bowl, and Basket Brigade, the Giving Tree, all of it is for naught unless the Christ is born in our midst. A Virgin Birth that is for all of us.

Last Wednesday night we conducted a Christmas service that is always the smallest of the Christmas season. Some twenty-one people attended our Blue Christmas service. It's a service that mirrors the reality of the Christ birth. A service that meets us in our vulnerability and our humanity, when we know we cannot be the world's Messiah but can simply be what we are. A time for crying and a time for healing, where there is room for pain and there is room for joy. And for me it is a time when I can enter fully into the fantasy of the Christmas story and know its profound reality.

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