

CHRISTMAS 1: 30 December 2012

1 Samuel 2: 18-20, 26

Ps 148

Colossians 3: 12-17

Luke 2: 41-52

In the name of Christ, born as one of us.

In the lead up to last Christmas, or possibly the Christmas before, I was sent a YouTube clip called 'Digital Christmas'. It takes you through the Christmas story using all the digital media tools: the Archangel Gabriel sends Mary a text message to tell her about the annunciation, Mary then e-mails Joseph to tell him she has to talk to him, and she checks out the Holy Spirit on Wikipedia. Joseph orders a donkey on line, works out the route from Nazareth to Bethlehem on Google Maps and discovers that all the inns in Bethlehem are full through an internet accommodation booking site. The three wise men e-mail each other to work out what gifts to buy, buy them through Amazon.com and then use GPS tracking to find their way to Bethlehem. The whole clip ends with some footage of the three wise men arriving at the baby's crib and presenting their gifts. It is brilliantly executed and very funny. The last line of all simply says 'Times change, feelings remain the same.'

There are many different takes on the story of the nativity. That was one of them. We have three different approaches in the four Gospels. We are so used to the Nativity story that forms the basis of the standard Christmas pageant that it is easy to forget it is actually a compilation of the 2 birth narratives we have in the Gospels, one in Matthew and the other in Luke. These two narratives differ quite markedly from each other. Matthew records the before and after, telling the readers about Mary's pregnancy and the angel's visit to Joseph and then recording the visit of the wise men, Herod's attempts to get hold of the baby and the family's flight into Egypt. Luke fills in the rest: Mary's discussion with the archangel Gabriel, the journey to Bethlehem because of the census, the accommodation difficulties, the baby's birth and the visit of the shepherds. No wise men, no flight to Egypt.

The third New Testament approach to Jesus' birth is the one we find in the Gospel according to Mark and the Gospel according to John: silence. Neither Mark nor John talk about Jesus' birth at all. The Gospel of Mark starts with the account of John the Baptist preparing the way for Jesus' public ministry. The Gospel of John starts with the mysterious, poetic text of the Prologue 'In the beginning was the Word...', and then continues by going straight into the story of John the Baptist.

We place great weight on the stories of Jesus' nativity but the New Testament writers seem to have been less focussed on them than we are. In the two Gospels which contain some form of birth narrative, it is there to point to a reality which goes far beyond it, a reality which is expressed poetically and mysteriously in the first verses of John's Gospel.

And just as the birth narratives are there to point to the reality of who Jesus actually was, so too is today's reading from the Gospel of Luke – the story of Jesus as a twelve year old boy staying behind at the end of the family's annual trip to Jerusalem so that he could hang about in the temple. The story comes directly after Luke's account of the two meetings in the Temple the first with Simeon and the second with the prophet Anna, both of whom understood who this baby was. 3 verses and twelve years later, we have the incident recorded in today's gospel passage. Again the Temple features prominently, underlining the importance the Temple and the life of the Temple will play in Jesus' life.

In a sense this incident is the last part of the birth narrative, even though it takes place 12 years later. After this there is another huge chronological leap to the story of John the Baptist. It is almost a sneak preview of what is to come, for here we have a child actively seeking out the things of God, listening, learning, asking questions and astonishing people by the depth of his understanding.

This lack of detail about Jesus' childhood seems odd to us. We are deeply interested in personal detail: what was his childhood like? Was he a good student? What was family life like? But that was of much less concern to 1st century Gospel writers than it is to us. Here in the Western world in the 21st century we are the heirs of several centuries of a highly individualistic way of seeing the world. The Gospel writers, on the other hand, have a different approach and their focus is theological rather than Christological – it is about God first and foremost and derivatively about Jesus. The lack of personal detail about Jesus was not a problem because, as the scholar Bill Loader has said, 'at the heart of the good news was not a personality, but an event in and through a person'.

This solitary incident from Jesus' childhood makes a theological point. It shows us that, even at 12 years old, Jesus' attachment to God is stronger than his attachment to Mary, Joseph and the family. To him it seems self-evident that he belongs in the Temple. To Mary and Joseph, no doubt frantic after days of searching for him, it is not obvious at all. But the point is made to us, the readers. Indeed, the whole of the second part of chapter 2 of Luke's Gospel serves to emphasise that this is no ordinary child – this is no one less than the son of God.

This, in fact, is someone worthy of our praise, praise of the kind we hear in this morning's psalm, Psalm 148. This wonderful, joyous psalm, comes at the end of the Psalter among a series of psalms, often called the "Hallelujah Hymns", which praise God for numerous gracious acts. Here, in Psalm 148, the psalmist exhorts the whole of creation to praise God.

As we contemplate the mystery of Christmas, the wonder of God's birth as one of us, we can do nothing better. Language stretches almost to breaking point under the strain of expressing something so mysterious, so powerful, so extraordinary. God's love for us, God's presence with us is awe-inspiring and prompts a response from us. Usually I talk about this response in terms of

being the body of Christ in the world, of trying to live as he lived, of being compassionate agents of healing, peace and love.

But sometimes, just sometimes, we are called simply to worship and these in-between days, bookended by Christmas and Epiphany, is one of those times. A time when, like the shepherds who were so surprised by the angel that they left their sheep, so astounded that they forgot their primary responsibility, we too come to the manger and worship this child, the Word incarnate, who was, who is and who shall be for evermore. And as we do so, we will worship across the generations with all who have gone before us and those who will come after us. Times change, feelings remain the same. Amen.

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