

A Subversive Christmas

Clay Nelson © 14 December 2014

We have lit the third Advent candle, the one for peace. It promises that the day is drawing near when we will once again hear the Christmas stories from the Gospels. In preparation for that I would like to give you my Christmas present early. Come Christmas Eve, I would like you to be able to actually enjoy and be transformed by the stories without having an internal argument with your rational side about Virgin births, moving stars, the birth of Saviours of the World, divine babies in human form, and whether or not any of it is history. This isn't easy to do for progressive Christians and even harder for those who are humanists, atheists or agnostics. Nor is it easy to hear these stories without all of the layers of history and tradition that have been laid over them. Perhaps even more deafening is that they have been sentimentalised to such an extent that we miss that they are comprehensive and passionate visions of another way of seeing life and of living our lives.

I once bought, quite cheaply, a second-hand table that would be perfect in my hallway. It had baroque features that looked promising but it had been painted multiple times, the last time in flat black. It took many hours of applying paint remover to discover a table of gorgeous rosewood with beautiful inlays on top that graced my home for many years. Christmas today is that flat black table. I hope to show you the original rosewood one, although I do not have time this morning to scrape back all of its accretions, only some patches. Through the patches I hope you will see the stories in their first century context challenging the common view, the status quo, of most times and places up to the present.

The first thing to point out is that there are two Christmas stories, not one. One is Matthew's, which features Joseph having a dream not to divorce Mary for adultery, wise men from the east following a moving star visiting Joseph's house (not a stable), Herod's killing of the innocents, and the holy family's flight to Egypt. The other is the one we will hear a portion of on Christmas Eve. It is Luke's story. Luke's version features an angel telling a virgin Mary and her barren cousin Elizabeth that they are improbably pregnant by the Holy Spirit, a road trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, angel choirs singing to shepherds, and a baby born in a manger.

Over time these two stories have been conflated, as reflected in my Nativity Scene I put out this week. Both shepherds and wise men have gathered around a swaddled baby in a crib with a star-lit angel looking on. There is nothing wrong with this blending, but it loses the discrepancies between the two stories. In Matthew, Joseph is featured. In Luke, the story centres on Mary. In Matthew, dreams are the medium by which Joseph gets divine messages, just like the Old Testament Joseph who had a coat of many colours. In Luke, divine messages come to Mary, Elizabeth and the shepherds via angels. In Matthew, Joseph and Mary already live in Bethlehem. They do not go to Nazareth until they return from Egypt. In Luke, Herod doesn't have a role to play; there is no killing of male children under two or a flight to Egypt. They live in Nazareth and return there from Bethlehem after the birth.

Because of these differences, as well as the miraculous elements like divine impregnation, angels, and moving stars, the question often raised today is: are these stories fact or fable? During the silly season there are often news stories trying to

show them as fact such as trying to find natural explanations for the star. Was it a comet or the alignment of several planets or a supernova? For the sceptical, they are just stories for children, and need not be taken seriously, making them fair game for a billboard like I put up one Christmas of Mary and Joseph in bed together. Joseph looks glum and Mary looks wistfully heavenward. The caption was, “Poor Joseph, God is a hard act to follow.” It got a strong reaction from around the world. Those of the “these stories are fables” faction got a good laugh, knowing that a virgin birth couldn’t possibly be true. Those of the “stories are historically factual” faction were outraged as if the Enlightenment had never happened. Interesting to me is both factions focus on facts. It is a characteristic of the modern mind that truth and factuality are the same. Both factions agree with this view. Those who laughed knew the facts didn’t support the story being true. They are fact-literalists. Those who were outraged knew that the stories were factually true because they are in the Bible. If they are not factually true, their “house of cards” faith, built on that assumption, comes tumbling down. They are fact-fundamentalists.

There is, however, a third option. The stories are parables. By definition, a parable is a narrative, a story. As in all stories, people do things; something happens in them. This is true of all of the parables Jesus made up. But his listeners did not worry about whether or not the events in them were factual. Parable is a form of language about meaning, not factuality. That the Prodigal Son and the Good Samaritan were not historical figures and the events described never happened does not make these parables any less true.

Parables are a form of metaphorical language. Metaphorical language has a “more-than-literal” meaning in which lies its truth. The truth parables are seeking to express is subversive. Jesus’ parables are intended to subvert the usual ways of seeing life and God. They undermine a taken-for-granted way of seeing the world and offer a different way of seeing how things are and how we might live.

Just as Jesus told subversive stories about God, his followers told subversive stories about Jesus. This is the case for both Matthew and Luke’s Christmas stories. They are parables. They were never about the facts surrounding Jesus’ birth. There are only three pieces of historical information in them, in which they both agree: Jesus was a historical figure whose mother was Mary (Joseph may not be historical) and whose home was Nazareth of Galilee.

In both cases their birth stories perform the role of an overture in a symphony. An overture is the opening part of a work that serves as summary, synthesis, metaphor or symbol of the whole. An example from literature would be Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August*, a history of the outbreak of World War I. It begins with a funeral. The crowned heads of Europe gather in London for the burial of Edward VII. She describes what actually happened that May morning in 1910 but she is symbolizing the burial of the old European order that would follow it between 1914 and 1918 as millions died, dynasties fell and thrones were emptied forever.

Like the funeral, Matthew and Luke’s parabolic overtures are miniature versions of the rest of the gospel they precede. Each is its own gospel in miniature and microcosm. But, since Matthew and Luke have quite different gospels, they must also have quite different overtures.

Matthew's overture portrays Jesus as the new Moses, hence the flight to Egypt and the tyranny of Herod (a new Pharaoh). Later in his gospel Jesus will give a new law in his Sermon on the Mount, reflecting Moses bringing the Ten Commandments down from Mount Sinai. Jesus, the new Moses, according to Matthew, was the Messiah who would inaugurate the Kingdom of Heaven on earth.

Luke's overture portrays Jesus as the new Adam, the first Son of God, who has come to bring justice to the marginalised. In Matthew it is the wise men from the east that come to Jesus, but in Luke it is the shepherds, who, as a class, are even lower in the social order than peasants. That Jesus is born in a manger is Luke's way of saying he came for the poor, the outcasts and the marginalised. He identifies with them. His association with women, tax collectors, gentiles, lepers, and the poor is a theme that runs throughout Luke's gospel. Jesus, the new Adam, according to Luke, was the Christ who would inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth.

Both Matthew and Luke view Jesus as the fulfilment of the Old Testament prophecy, so both their overtures are based on biblical allusions not historical fact. However, there is a historical fact that underlies both stories. They are played out in the context of being dominated by the overwhelming military, economic, political and ideological power of the Roman Empire in the first century. To not understand that context is to miss the most important meaning of the stories.

The Jewish people had a long history of being oppressed by different empires before Rome took its turn: first Egypt and then in order, Assyria, Babylon and Macedonia. This made Rome the fifth kingdom. The Romans inherited from the Greeks the idea that world history would involve five great ages or kingdoms. The fifth kingdom, the kingdom of Rome, would be the last climactic kingdom of the whole world. Around 30 AD, Caius Paterculus wrote a compendium of Roman history. He begins his account of how the gods "exalted this great empire of Roman to the highest point yet reached on earth" to become "the empire of the world."

What was the Roman Empire like at the time our Christmas stories are set? In brief, the Roman republic had been replaced 30 years earlier with a monarchy. Octavius became emperor. He was soon entitled Augustus. In Latin the title means "One Who is Divine;" in Greek, the "One Who is to Be Worshiped." Caesar Augustus collected numerous titles besides divine. He was also Son of God, God, God from God, Lord, Redeemer, Liberator and Saviour of the World. He attained his divine status, usually reserved for those after death, because he successfully ended a thirty-year civil war against Anthony and Cleopatra, which gave him an instant upgrade from Son of God to God.

What was his strategy to building an empire? Before battle he would turn his camp into sacred ground honouring his divinity as well as the war god Mars and the sea god Neptune. With the victory that followed he would secure the peace on land and sea. For Augustus and for Rome it was always about peace, but always about peace through victory, peace through war, peace through violence.

It was a crushing violence. When Herod the Great died in 4 BC there were numerous Jewish rebellions against Rome. One in particular was in Sepphoris, the capital of

Galilee. Rome sent 18,000 elite troops to crush it and they did, burning the city. But they also destroyed and plundered towns and villages along the way including Nazareth, only four miles away. Its females were raped and its children enslaved or killed. Those who went into hiding returned to little, for as one rebel said, "When you had nothing, the Romans took even that. They make a desert and call it peace." Jesus would have grown up being reminded regularly of the day the Romans came.

Both Matthew and Luke would have been familiar with the concept of a fifth kingdom that would be the climactic, final kingdom of the world. One that would bring peace, but for them it would be a kingdom ruled by God or his viceroy. For them he would be the long awaited Messiah who would come from the lineage of David, who was born in Bethlehem. In the century before Jesus' birth, it was thought by many that the Messiah would be a warrior king like David who would throw off the yoke of Roman oppression. The Messiah they got rejected violence and called for peace through justice, not victory.

Matthew and Luke knew that the Jews could not match the military, political and economic might of Rome. But they could challenge its ideological belief that it was divinely ordained to rule. They sought to challenge the Kingdom of Rome with the Kingdom of God in their gospels. Their overtures are shots across the bow. It is not by accident that Jesus is invested with the titles of the emperor: Son of God, King of Kings, Lord of Lords, Saviour of the World, Redeemer and Liberator. Giving such titles to a peasant preacher and healer in the backwater of the Roman Empire was a slap in the face to their oppressors and not taken lightly. It was a clarion call that there is a peace that is greater than Pax Romana. It is a peace where the lion lies down with the lamb. Where justice prevails. The weakest are protected and cared for. Where violence is rejected.

In the 2000 years since these overtures were written, the struggle of peace through justice against peace through victory is still being waged. We see it in Iraq as New Zealand ponders sending troops to fight ISIS. We see it in Ferguson, New York and Chicago, where unarmed black men are shot or strangled. These are just two from countless examples why we listen each year to these stories. This year, let us hear their subversive message and be transformed. Let the Advent candle for peace burn brightly.