

St Andrew's on the Terrace Sunday December 17 Advent 3 - Joy

Excerpts from John 3: 1-21

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." ³ Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." ⁴ "How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

Luke 2: 8-14

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."

POEM 'Nativity' by Joy Cowley

Look now!/ It is happening again!/ Love like a high spring tide/ Is swelling to fulness and overflowing/ The banks of our small concerns

And here again is the star,/ That white flame of truth/ Blazing the way for us/ Through a desert of tired words.

Once more comes the music/ Angel song that lifts our hearts/ And tunes our ears/ To the harmony of the universe Making us wonder how/We ever could have forgotten

And now the magi within us/ Gathers up gifts of gold and myrrh/While that other part of ourselves/The impulsive reckless shepherd/Runs helter-skelter with arms outstretched/To embrace the wonder of it all

We have no words/ To contain our praise/ We ache with awe/ We tremble with miracle/ As once again/ In the small/ rough stable of our lives/ Christ is born.

CONTEMPORARY READING 'Marcus Borg unwraps the nativity narratives'

<http://lucychumbley.com/understanding-the-nativity-narratives/>

Borg believes the nativity stories should be seen as *metaphorical narratives*. Nowadays, "metaphor is often seen as less than factual... as if the symbolic meaning is somehow less than the factual," he said. "Pretty much every story in the Bible is there because it has a more than factual meaning, and this is why our ancestors told these stories. These stories are *parabolic overtures* to the Gospels. "In general, parables are about meaning. The meaning and truth of a parable is not dependent on its factuality. ... it doesn't matter if there really was a Good Samaritan, a Prodigal Son – and to get into an argument about whether there was would be to miss the point. The point of parables is their meaning.

Parables can be truth-filled – truthful – whether they happened or not. Jesus told parables about God; his followers told parables about him. In short, the birth stories are about meaning. Believe whatever you want about them – now let's talk about what they *mean*." Just as an overture to a symphony or opera sounds the central themes of a longer work that follows, "Matthew and Luke wrote their overtures after they knew what was in the rest of their Gospels," Borg said. "These are not Christmas pageants for children. They are the Gospels in miniature."

'The miracle of being born human'

Sometimes it takes a while for the implications of our changing beliefs to make their full impact. It is over a period of time that my own belief in the divine has morphed and changed from an external God only out there, (**up** there actually), on a throne, Lord of all and Almighty chess player. This was a very secure position which I mostly enjoyed as somehow I had come through a relatively fundamentalist upbringing with an enduring sense that this external God loved me and wanted my good. In fact, it is with surprise that I look back and realise that even the goriness of the crucifixion somehow got through to me as the Almighty God going to inordinate lengths to save me from the perdition I deserved (according to the theology I was taught at the time).

I haven't changed to thinking I am perfect and need no transforming grace at all. But the location of God for me has changed. The *immanence* of the sacred – its presence within me – is more important, more centre stage for me now. I am less directed by an authoritarian voice outside of me - though I still take notice of wise advice and guidance in the Scriptures – and more, these days, guided by a careful reading of the Voice within me.

Though I was conscious of this shift happening within myself, I was still for quite a while, unaware of its wider implications. My previous view of God had definitely left me with the impression that God-the-divine, the sacred, the numinous, were the only 'OK' beings in the universe. I and my accompanying human beings were, in comparison, second class, second rate, inferior, even (if Calvin

and his mates were to be believed), depraved. (I always regretted that in my goody-two-shoes kind of way I didn't take full advantage of the label 'depraved' – what fun I might have had!)

I didn't realise till recently how pervasive this ordering of the world was within my psyche. God and the holy were 'good', humankind was 'bad'. So I missed out on the miraculous nature of what it is to be born human. On Christmas Day Fiona will be focusing on the baby born on that day. Just recently I have known families where babies have been born into them and watched the joy and fascination shown by in the one case an aunt and in another the grandparents. It is wonderful to behold.

Watching the children in the nativity play last week also brought back some of that wonder and awe at the birth and development of human beings – the way children are little people, almost like adults in miniature, (as well as of course being exactly themselves, incomparable with any other human being - a adult child or sage – though occasionally a child will amaze us with their wisdom and perspicacity). We say "she has an old soul". Certainly, last week with three 5-6 year olds walking on as three wise people, we were reminded that wisdom is not the preserve of grownups.

Last week reminded us of the two halves of the Christmas Story. Joy Cowley names them in the poem Wendy read today. "And now the magi within us/ Gathers up gifts of gold and myrrh/While that other part of ourselves/The impulsive reckless shepherd/Runs helter-skelter with arms outstretched/To embrace the wonder of it all."

We too have that wise aspect within these miraculous human bodies of ours. *We* are the sage, the thinker. We have Knowledge – of the divine and the everyday. *We know*. *We* intuit. *We* perceive. And in this country and this parish we may also own gold. As a mainly middle-class congregation we earn or have earned money which our wisdom can put to good use in the world whether for our own development of that of others.

And, we are, at times, impulsive and reckless like the shepherds. Not monied, not even respected much in the community. A shepherd's word was not accepted in the court of law in Jesus' time as they were often nomadic, frequently smelly and dirty. Yet here in this Christmas narrative they are given the role of first outside eye-witnesses of this significant birth – it's another signpost in this symbolic story of the differences about Jesus from the usual child born in the middle east. It's another part of the story that whispers to us "Watch this baby and the man he will be one day!"

So the 'God-voice' within whispers to me daily - not only at Christmas – sometimes in the measured tones of a sagely-wise person, other times with the breathless excitement of a shepherd whose world has suddenly been filled with angel song.

Joy's poem has captured poetically what Marcus Borg states more academically in the contemporary reading. These magical marvellous birth narratives tell us of a physical birth but express its truth and meaning in a spiritual way so as we take it all in, we can be re-born again and again not only as human beings but as spiritual beings also.

John Main, former leader of the worldwide community of Christian meditators keeps on emphasising that the point of meditating is always to begin meditating again and again. That each time we sit to spend those minutes in quiet, we are beginning again. At Christmas particularly, the meaning of these stories is that there is always a new beginning, not only each year but each day and not only each day but each minute.

Isn't it true that, when we are still enough in this busy world, to accurately hear those wise and those shepherd voices; still enough to hear That Voice, as Joy Cowley puts it, isn't it true that "We have no words/ To contain our praise/ We ache with awe/ We tremble with miracle/ As once again/ In the small/ rough stable of our lives/ Christ is born." So may it be.