

Nativities for Today

As we celebrate the approach of Christmas with the vivid nativities related by Luke and Matthew it's easy to forget that they are but preludes to the main body of those gospels: a way in. They are almost independent of what follows: there's no later reference back to them or their secondary characters: the shepherds and Magi leave no trace; there's barely a mention of Joseph (we assume that he'd died); and no further claim that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Mark – widely accepted as the first of the gospels – asserts that Jesus comes from Nazareth in Galilee; and emerges from the ranks of those who received the baptism of John; the main bodies of Matthew and Luke concur. Indeed, a critical reading of the gospels suggests that the actual birth of Jesus was probably unremarkable and of no significance to his ministry 30 years later. The two nativities are reconstructions, possibly based on valid traditions, but with some irreconcilable details (in Luke, Mary and Joseph come from Nazareth; in Matthew, they only set up home there on their return from Egypt). But in writing them, Luke and Matthew wanted to say things they found to be true about Jesus. So it might be fruitful to look at some points on which they agree.

Both agree that Jesus' birth is of universal significance, but is not universally recognised. The angel discloses the birth to shepherds out on the hillside: until they share what they have been told and witnessed, the enlarged population of Bethlehem appears to have been oblivious. Mary dwells on it all; but there's no evidence anyone else does. Matthew has nothing to say about the first months of Jesus' life, until visitors from even further out of town arrive in Jerusalem. Although he says that stirs up the whole city, it appears nobody other than the Magi undertakes the short pilgrimage to Bethlehem.

Jesus' birth is off-centre: he doesn't originate in a palace or capital city. But his arrival has something to say to those in power. The divinely appointed King of the Jews, coming to rule with the eternal righteousness of God, can only be deeply disturbing to a despot like Herod. In Luke, the challenge is subtler, and (as befits a Gentile author) to the power of Rome. Augustus, Emperor at the time of Jesus' birth and instigator of the *Pax Romana*, claimed god-like status for himself and was heralded as a *Saviour*. His birthday was adopted by the Greek cities of Asia Minor as New Year's Day, with a celebration of the benefits of his reign. An ancient inscription reads, *The birthday of the god has marked the beginning of the good news for the world*. Against that imperial background, Luke holds up *a Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord*; whose birthday is *good news for all people*. Both he and Matthew present us with a virgin birth, affirming their conviction that Jesus is truly of God, and therefore is rightly to be worshipped and adored, unlike the inflated and, in Jewish eyes, blasphemous claims of Augustus and his imperial successors.

Both Luke and Matthew find in Jesus fulfilment of the hopes and promises of the past, and so they locate Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, and within the house and lineage of David: plugging him in to the powerhouse of that tradition, which we draw on in our carol services. (Later in the Gospels, Jesus actually questions the identification of the Messiah as Son of David). In so doing, they effectively answer the Baptist's question: we are not to expect another. In Jesus we have all we need: he is God's final Word.

So let's come back to today. If we bemoan that celebrating the birth of Christ has become peripheral to Christmas in 21st century Britain: well, in some ways, that is the witness of the original stories: most people didn't notice, even then. But that doesn't mean his coming isn't good news for all people. All people, that is, except modern-day Herods, who reject all that Jesus represents and do violence to the image of God in their fellow human beings: the proclamation of Jesus continues to challenge and undermine them. Even where earthly power is benign, rather than despotic, increasing secularism means Christian faith is increasingly off-centre. But the nativities declare that is exactly where God often chooses to work: on a small scale, in overlooked places, through overlooked people. There are hidden examples in every community. But even though the coming of Jesus is of universal significance, it still isn't universally recognised. The example of the shepherds and Magi in our Christmas stories both affirms and motivates our small churches: we are to be overjoyed at the grace we have received (*to those who received him, says John, he gave the right to become children of God*). And we are to continue to strive to share that joy with those who haven't yet grasped all that God is holding out to us in Jesus.

Finally, conscious as we are that the world remains deeply marred by human sin, the knowledge that Jesus is God's final Word means that we cannot wait for someone else to come to make it more just, more compassionate, more peaceful, more hopeful. The Advent message is that one day, God in Jesus will make all things new. But in the meantime, we are to seek the empowerment of his Spirit to hasten the day, to further his kingdom, to share and be his light in the darkness.