

DECEMBER 25TH, 2018: CHRISTMAS

Eucharist at Midnight

Isaiah 9:1-6 Titus 2:11-14 Luke 2:1-14

Especially tonight it's important to remember that our two infancy narratives were the last parts of Matthew and Luke's gospels to be written. Though the evangelists eventually put them at the beginning, they didn't come into existence until after the rest of their gospels had taken shape.

The most important thing to keep in mind tonight isn't that Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem over two thousand years ago, but that Jesus of Nazareth dies and rises through us every day of our lives. Christianity begins with Easter, not Christmas.

Each evangelist chooses at one point of salvation history he'll begin to tell the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. Mark starts with Jesus' baptism by John the Baptizer, Matthew and Luke take us back to the circumstances surrounding Jesus' conception and birth, and John trumps everyone by asking us to reach into "the beginning" of Jesus' eternal preexistence. Yet before each writer picks up his stylus, he has already experienced the unique life which comes from being another Christ. The beginning of his gospel isn't the beginning of his dying and rising. He's simply putting something into words which goes far beyond words.

Biblically rooted, it's understandable that the earliest Christians turned to Scripture to help understand what had happened to them when they encountered the risen Jesus. They could, for instance, identify with the 8th century BCE people of Judah who rejoiced over the birth of Hezekiah, their future king. Isaiah looks forward in tonight's first reading to the drastic changes that longed-for prince will eventually bring into the life of each Israelite. Yet the transformation Jesus of Nazareth has already brought into the lives of Christians is far superior. There's nothing that can compare to their dying and rising.

The unknown author of the Letter to Titus was someone who can describe that dying/rising process first hand. He or she has already rejected "godless ways and worldly desires" and is trying "to live temperately, justly and devoutly in this age . . . eager to do what is good." There's been a 180-degree turnabout in this person's life, forcing him/her to write about Jesus' birth in completely different terms than an historian whose goal is simply "to set the record straight." The Titus writer is intimately involved in what's written.

Luke, on the other hand, continues his habit of naming names and referring to geographic places. We know precisely who the civil leaders are and where Joseph and Mary's trip takes them. The evangelist thinks it important to let his community know that Jesus of Nazareth didn't magically float down from heaven and land in a magical never-never land. He related with real people in real places. (Only recently has the village of Nazareth been located, named on an ancient mile marker. No wonder Nathaniel sarcastically asked, "Can any good come out of Nazareth?" It was the Podunk of Palestine.)

Though angels join in praising the newborn child, the crowd they're entertaining isn't high on the social ladder. Parents normally lock up their daughters when shepherds come to town, and according to some Jewish customs and laws, a shepherd's word is never to be accepted in court. They're notorious liars; they'll say whatever they're paid to say. Shepherds are among the scum of the earth.

Luke's community, because of their experiences of the risen Jesus, now look at these outcasts through different eyes. Just as Moses could see fire in a bush, so the community hearing this gospel didn't necessarily change the world in which they lived nor the people with whom they related; they simply changed how they looked at that world and those people. Something all of us should be doing tonight.

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DECEMBER 30TH, 2018: HOLY FAMILY
Sirach 3:2-6, 12-14 Colossians 3:12-21 Luke 2:41-52

The late Raymond Brown's writings and lectures cleared up a lot of the problems I had with the gospel infancy narratives – especially today's well-known pericope. Even as a kid, this "lost in the temple" passage didn't make sense. Why would God's parents miss a second's sleep over "losing" him? He's God! He can take care of himself, no matter how old he is or where he finds himself.

Brown helps us understand something all modern Scripture scholars take for granted: our sacred authors frequently employ sources. They don't begin writing with just a stylus and blank sheet of papyrus in front of them. They have other sheets of papyrus on their desk, papyrus already written on, writings they'll eventually integrate into their finished work. Sometimes, as in today's gospel, it's easy to notice when one source stops and another begins; at times, other sources have been so closely integrated that it takes an expert to point them out.

Luke used at least two different sources for his infancy narrative. He employed one in which the author included an annunciation to Mary, a narrative which had an angel inform the virgin beforehand about the divinity of her son. In the other, exemplified by today's lost-in-the-temple passage, the writer seems to have presumed Mary and Joseph only found out about Jesus' divinity after his resurrection. The child's parents were legitimately worried when he was inadvertently left behind in the Jerusalem temple. They certainly weren't faking it.

Among other things, these different sources tell us the early church was convinced there's more than one way to understand the gospel Jesus in our lives – even contradictory ways. Since all the first Christians thought semantically, they were always interested in the both/and of their faith, not the either/or. Such Greek, analytic thinking didn't hijack the church until late in the second century, long after our Christian Scriptures took shape.

It might especially be good to remember our biblical sources on this Holy Family Sunday. In my limited experience, no two families are alike; each encounters reality in a unique way. Not only do we experience things differently, we react differently, and, in the process, we and things around us constantly change. Physical punishment, for instance, which I simply took for granted as a child, could now get a parent arrested. Thankfully we see implications of our actions today that we never noticed yesterday. As we grow, families grow; and as families grow, we individually grow.

This directly applies to the Colossian author's command for wives "to be subordinate to your husbands." Though such a strict marriage hierarchy makes for smooth running, it reduces one partner to a non-entity. (Just as our church hierarchy often does to the laity.) In order to become the people Jesus intends, we need more than just one source commenting on our relationships.

Some behavior is basic Christianity, no matter what's going on around us. Husbands, for instance, should love their wives and fathers shouldn't provoke their children. At all times, as other Christs, we should "put on . . . heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience . . ." And as Sirach insisted, we should never "grieve" our parents. Even if a father's mind fail, there's never an excuse for "reviling" him. When positions switch and we're caring for those who once cared for us, love should always remain.

But once these essentials are covered, each family must make its own path through life. It's always good to appreciate that fact, especially during today's feast. If Luke didn't think it necessary to employ just one source to tell the story of Jesus' family, then we shouldn't be content just to employ one way to imitate Jesus' love in our families.

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