

Christmas 2022

St Brandon's

Isaiah 9:2-7; John 1:1-14

24-25 December 2022

“Wrapped up in cloth and placed in a manger – go see for yourself, He’s a total game-changer!” Those were lines spoken by my grandson in a school nativity service earlier this week. They’re not quite on a level with the magnificent poetic prose of the prologue to John’s gospel, but they nonetheless contain the same truth: “Wrapped up in cloth and placed in a manger – go see for yourself, He’s a total game-changer!”

The start of the prologue to John’s gospel is, of course, “In the beginning”, and we should read into that that we are about to be told a story. Not a ‘once upon a time’ story, but a story which, like its author, is full of grace and truth.

The story begins at the cosmic level – “In the beginning was the Word”. Outside of, ‘preceding’, if you like, both space and time, the Word, the living speech act of God, existed and then breathed forth the life and light which created everything that is. So time and space as well as the whole created order came into being through Him, and for Him.

But the prologue then moves swiftly to ‘ground’ (pun intended) this cosmic picture in the local. John the Baptist comes to a specific time and place, and bears witness to the coming into the world of the “true light, which enlightens everyone”. And that prophecy is fulfilled as “the Word became flesh and lived among us”. The living speech act of God enters the time and space He Himself had created.

But then there is a fourth element to the prologue, in addition to it being a story, and the cosmic and the local. For the prologue also points to a fundamental disjunction. The light, the true light which enlightens everyone, shines, yes, but it shines in the darkness. The darkness is the suffering, tragedy, injustices, hardship and circumstances that seem insurmountable, the evil of this world behind which is an Evil (capital E) that is intelligent and full of malice.¹ And this fundamental disjunction is revealed specifically in the fact that as the Word became flesh and entered His world, the world did not know Him. And even His own people did not accept Him. How could we have got ourselves into a situation where we, as the pinnacle of creation, no longer recognise our creator? And what to do about it, this fundamental disjunction?

Christmas, as we’re encouraged to celebrate it by ‘the world’, seems to me to be largely escapism. Forget, for a moment at least, all the hardship and tragedies, make merry in this happiest season of all. It’s a tinselly diversion from reality, perhaps tinged by a bit of good will to all people, a charitable donation here or there.

¹ I have taken elements from ‘The courage to make merry’ by Lancia E. Smith [The Cultivating Project | Cultivating Whole Lives Rooted in Christ](#), and from *The First Advent in Palestine* by Kelley Nikondeha, Broadleaf Books, 2022.

But Christmas, as we're encouraged to celebrate it by the Christian story, means first that we face honestly the darkness, the darkness both in ourselves and in the world; that we face the fundamental disjunction that exists. After all, the birth of the heralded Prince of Peace unfolds with refugees, infanticide, and collateral damage for those in the villages of Judea, atrocities even in the wake of incarnation.

And therefore the appropriate response to the birth of the Christ-child, the one wrapped in cloth and placed in a manger, is, first of all, one of lament. Lament is how we should respond to a world not immediately changed by God's arrival. Grief is the honest response to the human experience even after God embodied our flesh and frame. We must acknowledge, and face, and confront the darkness.

But, of course, it doesn't end there. What the coming of the living speech act of God who enters the time and space He Himself had created also tells us is that we are part of this story. We are each living and taking our part in the most expansive epic ever told. This great story is still being written, and each of our lives, in our own local, specific time and space, adds a line to it until the story is fully written.

All the great stories have elements of suffering, tragedy, injustices, hardship, and circumstances that seem insurmountable. That is why faithfulness, courage, good will, and perseverance are the character traits we cheer for in every hero and companion in the stories we love. Yes, there are crushing blows in life, things outrageously unfair and unjust, and things simply heart-breaking. But these things are not the whole story, not now and not in the final end. They are only elements of a greater story that is still being told.

No matter what we see, or suffer, in our own lives or the lives of others, we don't yet see the full story or its fulfilment. The theatre of our story lies beyond our small vision, over the horizon of time and space. This great cosmic story, in which we are privileged to play our part, has the very best of endings. That is our deep comfort and our inspiration. That is why we should, in all kinds of ways both small and large in our local, specific time and space, practice hope.

And the focal point of this story, the hinge point on which it all turns, is the child wrapped up in cloth and placed in a manger – go see for yourself, He's a total game-changer!

Amen.