

Two stories. They both can't be right!

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 26 December 2021

A Reflection by Rev Bill Thomas

Christmas 1C - St. Stephen's Day

Acts 7: 54 – 8: 1; Luke 2: 41 – 52

The video of this worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/> The version below is not a transcript, but the script from which the reflector spoke, so there may be some changes of wording.

Another Christmas is over. I hope it was a good day for you but I know that sometimes it is a not so merry a Christmas. I am thinking of two of my neighbours in my village. For one, this is her first Christmas without her husband and for another, who three days ago fell and broke her leg is now in the San Hospital where they have just re-imposed a ban on visitors. Meanwhile their daughter has had to find respite for her father who has Parkinsons.

I didn't grow up in a religious home. My mother had been raised a Catholic, but was not practising and my father was a committed Freemason. Dad wanted my brother and me to join the Masons, but neither of us were interested at all. Anyway, neither of us was baptised. I was baptised after I came to faith as a teenager with the rite from the Book of Common Prayer entitled "*Baptism for those of riper years and can answer for themselves.*"

Of course we observed Christmas in a secular way with a tree, presents, cake, chicken for lunch (a treat in the 1940's). I think I was 17 when I first tasted turkey. And we enjoyed the Christmas carols. But we didn't go to church.

Did we observe Advent? Well yes in a sort of a way. There was the end of the school year, there was getting a tree from the bush and decorating it, there were Christmas beetles, the Nativity scene in the window of David Jones and of course visiting Santa. The real Santa was the one at Anthony Hordern's store. He was very fat. I had noticed other skinny Santa's which my mother told me were the real Santa's helpers.

O what a tangled web we weave when first we learn to deceive.

I actually was Santa on one occasion. This was at a Christmas party for a wide circle of friends and lots of children. The hosts lived on a large property, the only house on the road which ran off New Line Road, West Pennant Hills. The plan was that someone would drop me off at the end of the road, I would walk up with the bag of goodies ho-ho-ing and ringing my bell and after sowing the seeds of materialism in the minds of these children I would wander off down the road. After a short interval my good wife Ruth would discretely slip down in our car, I would disrobe and return to the party.

An hour later I was still waiting. Finally I had to flag down a passing motorist to go to the party and tell them about the poor old Santa waiting to be rescued. Ruth, who had completely forgotten, felt that this was more amusing than I did. I divert.

Like all young children I was drawn into the Christmas story – there is magic and mystery, shepherds, angels, wise men, a strange star and the birth of a child in a stable. These are stories a young child will readily believe.

We connect our own stories to the Christmas story don't we? When some significant event in our personal or community life happens around the Christmas period, it makes a special connection. Christmas can have a power to help us make sense of things. That's interesting, isn't it? Is this a little of what this Incarnation thing is about? Maybe. Think of the Christmas Eve Truce in 1914 when British and German soldiers sang carols and exchanged gifts.

We are getting into the power of stories. Did you see "*Christmas in Australia*" this week, presented by Christine Anu? She brought together stories from many cultural perspectives and particularly her own Torres Strait Islander heritage. For me the most touching moment was when Christine and her daughter sang "*Silent Night*" in language via zoom to Christine's mother in the Torres Strait. That's a story with a few layers.

Over the last weeks, on our Advent Journey, we have immersed ourselves in story. Prophecies from the past recalled, strange visits from a heavenly messenger, unexpected pregnancies, the parallel birth narratives of John and Jesus.

We have this year been following the story as Luke tells it. There is also a Matthew version and I guess you all know they don't match very well. Our Christmas cards and pageants blend them. But they both can't be right. It's not just a star and an undefined number of wise men, in one, and choir of angels and shepherds in the other. Note that donkeys and oxen do not get a guernsey in either.

Two major bits that don't match up are firstly, that in Matthew, Bethlehem was the home of Mary and Joseph at the time of Jesus birth whereas in Luke their home was in Nazareth and they came to Bethlehem only because of the census. Secondly, in Matthew, the story becomes very dark with Herod seeking to kill Jesus, the family seeking refuge in Egypt and then the murder of the young children in Bethlehem. But in Luke the family follow the usual rituals of circumcision and purification. Their child is affirmed by Simeon and Anna and they return peacefully to their home in Nazareth.

Two stories. They both can't be right. Or can they?

Do we have to choose between fact and fable? Our post enlightenment thinking has given us a mindset that says that something is only true if it is factually correct. It must be factual to be true. If not factual it is fable -- fairy story, of no value – lacking in truth.

Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan in their book "*The First Christmas*" argue that there is a third way, and that is that both these stories can be understood as parable. Their truth is in the meaning of the parable.

We all know, don't we, that the truth of Jesus' parables such as the Good Samaritan or the Prodigal Son, does not lie in whether there was an actual son or an actual Samaritan. That is irrelevant for the truth in those stories. Borg and Crossan go on to argue that each birth story is an overture to the Gospel that follows.

We are used to the idea of overture in the field of music, being the instrumental introduction to a ballet, opera, or oratorio. Borg and Crossan explain what they mean by referring to the first chapter of Barbara Tuchman's *"The Guns of August."* This book, published in 1962, describes the negotiations between the Great Powers that led to the outbreak of World War 1. Her thesis is that bungled diplomacy caused the war.

The first chapter describes the funeral of King Edward VI in 1547. This was the last time that all the crowned heads of Europe met together. By the end of the decade, the Great War had torn apart that political fabric, and the empires and kingdoms represented at that funeral had vanished or had been changed beyond recognition. This chapter is the overture to the body of the book.

So if we apply these ideas of parable and overture to the birth narratives, then we may be on the right track to find the truth of each.

In Matthew's birth narrative we see parallels to stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. There is the birth of Jesus and the birth of Moses. There are evil rulers (Pharaoh and Herod) who do not hesitate to kill children when their power is threatened. There are two Josephs, who have dreams and visions. There is an emphasis in Matthew on the fulfilment of prophecy. In the body of the Gospel, Jesus is the new law-giver the fulfilment of Moses. Then there is the symbolism of the gifts of the Magi: gold for kingship, frankincense for worship, myrrh for burial. These gifts represent key elements in the story Matthew will tell.

In Luke's birth narrative there are three themes which are played out in the body of his Gospel: an emphasis on women, an emphasis on the marginalised and the power and role of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel of John has no birth narrative but has its own form of overture we call the prologue in which John describes the pre-existence of the Christ, the Word, signalling that this Gospel will explore the divinity of Christ which we see most clearly in the *"I am"* claims of Jesus.

Mark jumps in boots and all: *"The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."*

So what of our story today? The boy Jesus, aged 12, in the Temple. Why has Luke included this material? Is this simply a pleasant little story with no particular significance or are there links with the birth narrative and the body of the Gospel?

My first response when thinking about this story is that it reflects something about the home-life of Jesus. Obviously this was a faithful and devout Jewish family. They followed all the laws and would have passed this on to Jesus and his sisters and brothers.

I am sure that, for most of us, our values were given shape by our childhood family life. There may be things we have absorbed into ourselves, some we have come to question and some we may have turned away from or rejected. As I have said my up-bringing was a non-religious one, but we were always taught to respect difference whether it was racial or religious. We were taught by word and example not to hold prejudice. My mother, who had lost her eldest brother at Gallipoli gave us a strong commitment to pacifism, my brother, seven years my senior and whose atheism I came to reject and who was as left wing as you could be in the late 40's and early 50's reinforced a desire for social justice.

When I came to faith in my teens I already had a lens for what I was looking at in the Church. While I came to faith within evangelical Sydney Anglicanism I needed to move beyond that, which I did when I discovered the Student Christian Movement at Sydney University.

I also discovered Ruth there. It has been said that SCM also stood for students contemplating marriage. I was at home with the progressive thinking and commitment to peace and social justice. I also found this in the Congregational church which I joined when we married. Women were affirmed and church governance was democratic.

Jesus in the Temple story is aged 12. He is on the cusp of becoming an adult within the life of the synagogue. So this is to some extent a coming of age story. His family have been doing this annual pilgrimage every year but now Jesus is taking an interest. He stays behind.

The family don't miss him for a day, no doubt because there would have been a crowd of family and friends from Nazareth also in the party. Now they can't find him and they hunt the backstreets of Jerusalem looking in places where perhaps a child might have been abducted or harmed. In these situations we always think the worst, don't we? Or perhaps Mary would be thinking of the strange prophesy of Simeon, 12 years earlier, about the destiny of this child, but also *"that a sword will pierce your own soul too"*

Then after three days of agony, there he is, impressing the learned men of the Temple with his knowledge and questions. His parents however are not impressed. How can you do this to us? He replies; *"Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"* These are the first words spoken by Jesus recorded in any of the Gospels. I must be in my Father's house. This is where the boy feels he must be. Why can't his parents see this?

But they do not understand his answer. This will not be the last time Jesus is misunderstood by those close to him. Nevertheless, just as it was when the shepherds gave the angel's message to Mary and Joseph, *"His mother treasured all these things in her heart."*

In Jesus' coming of age he is sensing where he belongs. He perhaps has a growing understanding of his relationship with God.

And just as it was when he was first taken home to Nazareth, *"Jesus increased in wisdom and years and in divine and human favour."*

As I see it, the story of the boy Jesus in the Temple is not a stand-alone story. It's part of Luke's "overture" to the main body of the Gospel, as we can see by the links with the birth narrative. It also foreshadows what lies ahead. The age of 12 – links with the raising of Jairus' 12 year old daughter and healing of a woman who had bled for 12 years.

His parents search for three days --- and Jesus death and resurrection cover a period of three days. Jesus understanding of his special relationship with God will later lead him to confront the religious leaders and teachers at whose feet he had once sat. He will denounce their hypocrisy and their oppression of the poor and set himself on a collision course with religious and secular power.

"It is written, my house should be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers."

If the birth narratives can be thought of as overtures to the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, then these Gospels, along with Mark and John might be seen as overtures to the lives of the many who, over the centuries, have followed Jesus. The on-going life, witness and struggle of the church.

St. Stephen, whose feast day is today, is an example of this witness and struggle.

Our second reading today tells of the martyrdom of Stephen. Now if Stephen had stayed on task he might have saved himself a lot of grief. Stephen, along with six other worthy people were chosen to sort out bun fights (literally) between the Hellenists and the Hebrews over the distribution of food to the widows of their communities. The disciples had decided that *"It is not right that we should neglect the Word of God in order to wait at tables."*

"It is not right that we should neglect the Word of God in order to wait at tables."

Hmmmm. Make of that what you will.

So the seven chosen were the first to be ordained into a ministry of service – a diaconal ministry. Five of the seven are not mentioned again in the New Testament. We hear more of only two. Stephen is caught up in the early persecution of the church, confronting the religious power brokers, and is murdered for his loyalty to Christ and for speaking the truth. Philip goes beyond Jerusalem to take the Good News to Samaria and beyond.

My call to ordained ministry came at the 6th Assembly of the Uniting Church, in 1991, where I was present as an observer and when the decision was taken to renew the diaconate. The vision was for a ministry, already being undertaken by deaconesses, of service in the community and with a strong emphasis on social justice.

We need to be waiting on tables by feeding the hungry and finding shelter for the homeless. But we need to be asking why people are hungry and homeless. What are the structures in society that cause inequality and injustice? How do we change them? Like Stephen, what risks are we prepared to take? They can start with small steps.

A final story. When I was in Ministry at Campsie-Earlwood-Clemton Park, in partnership with Mata Havea-Hilau, who is now our Moderator Elect, we started an after school youth group. One afternoon, Christine, who was of Tongan background, came to youth group wearing a headscarf. When asked about this she explained that her friend at Canterbury Girls High was being teased by other girls because of her hijab. So Christine put on a head scarf in solidarity. I said to Mata, *"We're getting somewhere with these kids."*

Amen.