

Many years ago, soon after beginning my seminary studies, I had a discussion with Patristic scholar Father John McGuckin about the importance of a continuing faithful engagement with the stories of scripture. He could identify works from those who, although they may have had impressive academic careers or had been able to construct arguments, only had a passing or recent engagement with scripture. Even devout faith that was not grounded in a deep connection with scripture, the reading and re-reading of the stories, was not properly informed and could even be dangerous.

He went on to discuss how he thought Christianity had become a garrulous enterprise with many people and so called “professionals” rushing forward to show what they knew or coming forward with some new insight etc. His advice to me was not to forget the stories of our faith in scripture. To interpret the world and the scriptures, whatever I learn or know or think I know, through these stories.

It is important for us to know the stories in scripture, but part of this knowing is the existential, the lived engagement with them, read in light of our own struggles, our weaknesses and the suffering and anxiety of the age in which we live.

Year after year, Jesus the infant is presented to us in the mystery of the incarnation, God taking up life as one of us, as a particular person at a particular time in history. The quiet infancy of God, the Logos of all creation, presents himself in the fragility and helplessness of dependant humanity in the person of Jesus.

We tend to think of the nativity scene as offering a *gemütlich* or cosy sense of togetherness that comforts children and warms the hearts, but this sense of comfort contrasts sharply with the harsh surroundings of the world. For this story is a story of people, fragile, huddled together against the cold and the indifference of empire found in the struggle of their everyday lives.

Our reading in Luke begins with the words “Now in those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus” (Luke 2.1) Matthew places Jesus’ birth against the background of Herod’s reign. Luke places it against the broad and perhaps seemingly limitless power of the Roman Empire - the sweeping subjection of all those who fall under the the Pax Romana, the Peace of Rome. This is a comparison of kingdoms. As with any kind of power, there are winners and losers and those gathered around the manger are not counted among the winners. Here another king will be born in weakness and fragility, out in the cold. A Saviour subject to the elements, receiving little or nothing from the benefits of status, wealth and the security of empire.

Rev. Mike Waltner

Luke 2:1-20

25 December 2021

Perhaps we need to ask ourselves why he did not come in greatness. Why was he not born into the line of Augustus or Herod? Instead he comes amidst the poor, the vulnerable. He begins life in a borrowed feed stall and, later in life, will warn a prospective disciple that he has no place to lay his head (Luke 9:58). Poor—the marginal. They are not the victors, they are the victims. This contrast in Luke is not accidental. The context is one of fragility. This king will depend for his life on the sacrifice of labour and struggle of his mother, to the openness and generosity of Joseph who takes this woman as his wife to care for her and for the child that is not his own.

In Western countries, the wealthy and healthy, we find that indeed it does seem that fewer people are able to pay attention to or find a connection to the story of faith, to the story of the infant Jesus. There is concern that this story will no longer be told or understood. But like our Gospel reading, we still find that this story and the good news, like the infant Jesus himself, are cared for by the suffering and weary who still preserve and hold on to this story.

Jesus the King is born as a servant, into poverty, into cold, into the weakness and fragility of life, huddled against a backdrop of the cold indifference of those who hold power. This is an image of God's coming, against all odds, into the fragile places and conditions of history and human life, something that could so easily be extinguished but still somehow finds a way to renew and give life.

This year seems like the last. I think all of us, during the time of Covid, have had to confront our own fragility and the seemingly fragile conditions of world. As societies struggle to cope, as families continue to struggle to maintain or find work, to be together it is fair of us to ask "Where is he?"

It is a legitimate question. We are once again pondering the lockdowns and regulations that have past, with the new variant Omicron causing those in power to enforce restrictions that keep many of us away from family, friends and loved ones. If you have survived this year consider yourselves fortunate. And what about those not just at the margins of society but those with no status at all? Do we think of those who are not regarded by any census, not counted in any society the refugees on Island of Lesbos or the Grand Canary Islands, those stranded on the border between Belarus and Poland, those who are on the run fleeing arrest, torture and persecution in countries like Afghanistan and Myanmar.

When we think about these things it is good that we are reminded by our Gospel reading that the story of our salvation in Jesus Christ is not found in power politics, in rulers who only seem to know how to use their power to break things and people. God did not come into the world as a part of the nationalist movement. He was not cared for and nurtured by a vicious mob whose ears are

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only too eager to believe the false lies of wicked rulers. God did not come into a place of indifference or hostility to the poor, the weary and the vulnerable, the sick and the outcast.

So if you ask where God is, that is where he is. If you are suffering, if you are hurting, he is with you and he is also with others at the margins, the poor, the outcast and refugee. Go and find him in service to them.

We encounter the story of salvation each year at Christmas, once again meeting the infant Chris, who is fragile and even dependant in the company of the lowly. He does not come into the world in refined glorious splendour, but in the harshness of the cold and cared for by those weary from long travels. The hope for the world is found as a beating heart among the destitute, the unknown, the unimportant, the forgotten.

God does not disregard or show embarrassment or contempt for the poor and lowly, the sick and vulnerable, so how can we? For Christians who truly seek to understand this story and truly see where his kingdom enters into the world, this is what we must remember. God does not now, and has never, chosen to side with the interests of the rich and powerful against the poor and the weak.

If you are struggling to find the voice of God in this world, in your life, I would recommend sitting with this story and reflecting on how it connects or can connect with your life. As the angel said to the Shepard, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." (Luke 2.10) - for all people. The Good News of Jesus Christ is good news for all people not a select few. This is indeed something to celebrate. God is with us, but he is not found in comfort and isolation from those who suffer and who are weary.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, in Isaiah you have promised to bring those who walk in darkness into light to break the rod of the oppressor, to bring justice to those who abuse others through violence. Thank you for the gift of your Son, who came as a child. Who in his life, ministry and death took the side of the poor, the lowly and the outcast. Help us to know and better understand his story, to seek his authority in our lives and to remember to care for this story like Mary and Joseph cared the infant Jesus himself. Send your spirit upon us, give us the courage to seek him and find him in those fragile places of our lives and our world.

Amen.

Merry Christmas.