

A Crèche in a Yard (Matthew 2:1-12)

Every family has its own bundle of stories about Christmas. In recent years we have added one which I would like to share. Like most families we engage in a frantic trip to the assembly on Sunday morning to get there on time. In the last few years something has happened at Christmas that has given a little bit of extra sparkle to the journey.

As we turn on the street before we get to church there is a house on the corner where the owners have shown by displays in their yard an affinity for the liturgical year. At Advent a stable appears and ultimately the holy family is surrounded by oxen and asses. But where are the magi? For several weeks as we pass by we look anxiously for their appearance! And then, just as we are about to give up, over in the far corner of the yard we see the magi on camels bringing the traditional gifts to honor the Savior of the world.

This little journey across the yard goes on for several weeks. Every Sunday the magi get a little closer to the stable until, following proper liturgical chronology, they reach the stable.

Now you may think that my family is somewhat starved for things to interest them on Sunday morning; and you may be right. But we all have to admit that this little vignette is typical of the evocative power of the birth accounts of Jesus in scripture: Christmas! In the world of the 'Christian Year' there is nothing else like it. We have universalized the images. Why else would I go to the trouble of dragging a crèche and accompanying camels half way around the world because they were made in Israel? There is something special about this time. Culturally it is self-evident. But for a people who take seriously the restoration of the faith and practice of the ancient Christians what theological power is relevant to us today in these accounts. Let us try to explore that in the context of Matthew 2:1-12.

The Scriptural Perspective

The visit of the magi only occurs in Matthew 2:1-12. If we take a second look at the text serious questions can be asked quickly. Who are these men from the East? What is the search that precipitated their journey? Bethlehem is almost a suburb of Jerusalem; how can we account for the star wheeling around in the sky? Why did Herod cautiously assign strangers from the East to give him information about a potential usurper? Couldn't he use his own secret police?

Yes, with the Christmas pageant syndrome and questions like these some of us may be tempted to give up on this text and go elsewhere. But before we assign it to the bin of childhood memories I am here today to assert that it may be worth a second look. After all there are many stories in scripture that stretch ordinary reality. Think of the marvelous story of the spies of Israel who encounter the Nephilim as they sneak into the land (Numbers 13:1-33); or the Lord opening the eyes of Elisha's servant to see his heavenly armies when the city seemed doomed to destruction by the Syrians (2 Kings 6:15-19). One commentator has referred to these biblical stories as a call to believers to develop 'a second naiveté'. Are we prepared to enter into the real story-world of the Bible? Can we understand this way of telling us what it is all about?

You see accounts like these beckon us to enter the wider framework of the great narrative of the Bible. Like so much of the Bible stories like these remind us of our connection to the drama of God choosing the children of Abraham to be his elect people to bring the knowledge of him and his ways to others throughout the earth. Like so many others this narrative has its 'ups' and 'downs'. And it is precisely here that we can begin to connect the visit of the magi with this greater narrative.

For indeed one of the 'downs' of the great narrative was the exile of the children of Abraham from their land. Core remnants of God's people found themselves stranded in Babylon. Desperately they wondered whether there could be a future for them. And then they came across a word from a prophet:

Arise, shine... God's glory will be seen upon you
and nations will come to your light
Lift up your eyes round about,
and see they all gather together,
they come to you...

A multitude of camels will cover you...
they shall bring gold and frankincense...

Your gates shall be open continually
day and night they shall not be shut
that men may bring to you the wealth of the nations.
(Isaiah 60:1-12 – selected verses.)

As it happens so often in scripture here Isaiah is talking about a 'grand reversal.' The people of God are now in bondage to foreign powers. But a reversal of their situation is coming. The persecuted remnant will soon be sought out to offer hope to the multitude. The nations will seek the secret of their peacefulness. In short they will be the light of the world. Or, if you will, they will reflect the one who is 'the light of the world.'

Matthew and the Grand Narrative

Matthew also connects with this grand narrative. The people of God once again are in darkness (Matthew 4:16). Then in chapter one a righteous man, Joseph, of the family of Abraham and David adopts a young boy born of a virgin. Jesus is now of the ancestry of David. He will be the restorer of the remnant people of God. Not only that: Matthew 2 hints that he will be the dispenser of the medicine of God's balm for the healing of the nations spoken of by Isaiah. Representatives of the great river cultures of the East come to him on camels. He is given sanctuary in Egypt (Matthew 2:1-16). His impact will be universal.

Of course this is only the beginning of what must ultimately take place. Even Herod hears from the mouths of the official theologians that out of Bethlehem will come the future leader of Israel (Micah 5:1-3). The Greek Bible adds he will be the shepherd of the sheep. He fulfills this word through a ministry of teaching and healing (Matthew 4:22-9:38).

But there is more. Throughout his ministry to Israel he comes in contact with some Gentiles: people from the nations (Matthew 8:5-10; 15:21-28). It is a foretaste of the future time when all nations and peoples will sit together at the great banquet table of the new age. In preparation for that time word of the message of his kingdom must be taken to all nations (Matthew 24:14; 28:16-20). In anticipation of that time Jesus warns that it may be a time of reversal. Those of Abraham's children who cuddled up to Herod and his kind may not get a seat at the table while those who welcome the lowly disciples who carry on Jesus' mission will have a pleasant surprise (Matthew 8:11-13).

Conclusion

We are not so far from those events as we think. Yes, there is much to be discouraged about contemporary times. Even the Church is often demoralized. There are many voices that triumphantly proclaim that the 'Christian age' must now take its place in the list of eras of the past. The world has moved on to something else. Headlines boldly assert that fewer and fewer people in the West identify themselves as Christians.

But Matthew 2 and the 'grand narrative' of scripture remind us that we have been here before.

In the earliest church believers also faced a cynical world which had lost faith in the old ways. People too were burdened with the bondage of everyday life, manifold illnesses, and facing troubling situations on top of this most felt as marginalized as we do today.

Yet these believers had one great advantage. They had a story and it enabled them to triumph. People came to them for hope; and they grew because others wanted to know their secret. And what is that secret? It was what the magi were seeking when they first made that lengthy trip from the other side of the Euphrates. That is why a crèche in a nondescript yard can still be a significant sign today.

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