

DECEMBER 25, 2015: CHRISTMAS – EUCHARIST OF THE DAY

Isaiah 52:7-10 Hebrews 1:1-6 John 1:1-18

Especially on biblically based feast days, like Christmas, it's essential to remember that our Scriptures, if written today, would be found on the editorial page, not the news page of our daily papers. Biblical narratives were never intended to be blow by blow descriptions of what actually happened thousands of years ago. Our sacred authors simply created them to help us understand the deeper meaning and implications of those significant events. That's why we, for instance, have two contradictory accounts of Jesus' birth in Matthew and Luke's gospels. The two evangelists had two different, contradictory editorials (or "theologies") that they wanted to convey to their communities.

Every year a good friend – faithful to the two independent birth narratives - puts two separate crèches under her Christmas tree. One, based on Matthew's narrative, is a miniature first century CE Palestinian home sporting a large picture window, the baby Jesus is lying in a cradle in the middle of the living room, a star is positioned above the house and several astrologers are plodding down the street following the star. The second, from Luke's account, is a small primitive stable with the baby Jesus lying in a feed trough, Mary and Joseph are on either side of him, surrounded by animals and shepherds, while an angel hovers above the entire scene. My biblically faithful friend provides her family and friends with a far more accurate depiction of Luke and Matthew's editorials than the usual "crib set" which combines both narratives into one.

Fortunately, in today's Johannine account of Jesus' birth, there's no doubt we're dealing with theology. The evangelist mentions no historical details about the birth event. He simply provides us with pure editorial. For John, Jesus' arrival means that the darkness all of us humans encounter in our daily lives has now been shattered by the light of the risen Christ. He/she provides us with a life we can't experience in any other way. We need only be open to that light and life, open to that unique word of God which Jesus is. The Christ will take care of the details.

The author of Hebrews couldn't agree more. Like John, he expects his community to discover God by looking at Jesus of Nazareth, - by relating to a person - not by reading sacred writings or following a bunch of rules and regulations. According to his theology, unless we personally experience this special person, our concept of God will always be lacking something. "In times past," he writes, "God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son, whom he made heir of all things . . ."

No wonder the early church often turned to today's Deutero-Isaiah's passage when they reflected on the importance of the risen Jesus among us. They not only employed the passage, they also stole its key word "glad tidings" to describe their four first century CE writings about him/her. The Greek word "euangelion" – gospel or good news - perfectly summed up their experience of this unique creation in their daily lives. "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the one who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation" Matthew, Mark, Luke and John faithfully conveyed that good news to their four communities.

But, as I mentioned above, their gospels were created as editorials, not as historical documents. Since they presumed other editorials would follow, it would be interesting if we took a few minutes today to write our own good news about this event. I wonder what would be contained in each of our personal editorials.

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DECEMBER 27TH, 2015: FEAST OF THE HOLY FAMILY
Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14 Colossians 3:12-21 Luke 2:41-52

One of the most significant discoveries in the last 150 years of biblical studies is that most of our sacred authors used sources. Those familiar with the four mosaics of the evangelists immediately under the dome of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome will remember how each gospel writer is depicted with a piece of papyrus in front of him, a stylus in his hand, and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove on his shoulder. Were those mosaics created today and not in the 16th century, the evangelists would have several pieces of papyrus in front of them, not to write on, but to copy from.

The discovery of the use of sources helped solve a problem with today's gospel pericope which I already had as a child. If Mary was told by an angel in chapter 1 that her child is the son of God, how, in chapter 2 after losing him and eventually finding him in the temple, could she say, "Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety?" Why would God's mother be anxious about even temporarily losing him?

The late Fr. Raymond Brown addressed my problem in his classic book *The Birth of the Messiah*. He presumed Luke employed at least two different sources in his infancy narrative. The chapter 1 source contained an annunciation to Mary; the chapter 2 source knew nothing about such a unique encounter. The community which produced the latter presumed Mary, like any parent, was legitimately worried about her missing child.

When we couple Luke's use of sources with Brown's conviction that biblical annunciation narratives are simply literary devices created by our sacred authors to let their readers in on the meaning of the events they're narrating, today's gospel passage prompts some significant insights. If the historical Joseph and Mary didn't receive any annunciations, then they, as a family, had to deal with one another as we have to deal with one another in our own families. They didn't spend 30 years just pretending to be a real family; they actually were a real family

Mary, Joseph – and even Jesus – would have applied today's Sirach passage to themselves. All three had to work on their relationships and appreciated any biblical help they could surface. They wouldn't have automatically related in an ideal way to one another. It took time and a lot of effort to really build a family.

These chosen three lived in a particular place during a specific time in history. They, like all of us, had to deal with things and situations within those limits, just as the author of today's Colossians passage was restricted by his/her historical environment. The priest giving my parents their marriage instructions took this Colossians passage literally. He told my mother that my father was to have the last word in every important family decision. That certainly was a different time and place. I don't know how his instructions would play in most places today. (Fortunately, for the good of their relationship, my parents didn't follow his advice even back in Belleville, IL, in 1938.)

On the other hand, most of what the Colossians author says applies to everyone, no matter their time and place. "Put on . . . heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another . . . And over all these, put on love, that is, the bond of perfection."

Especially on this particular feast, it's good to remember that one early, anonymous Christian community believed these words applied as much to the Holy Family as they apply to all our families here and now.

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