

Looking backwards for Christmas

James Alison

Who appears in our midst during midnight mass? I suppose most of us, nudged along by the ceremony of the placing of the babe in the manger, assume that it is the infant Christ. But the one who is present in our midst at midnight mass, as at every eucharist, is the crucified and risen Lord. We are, in fact, as at every holy communion, celebrating Easter.

I don't say this to be iconoclastic: there is clearly nothing wrong with celebrating the birth of our Lord also. I want to meditate on the curious piece of shorthand in which we often engage when we celebrate the birth of our Lord – as if Easter were yet some way off.

We are less likely to appropriate Christmas into our own tame scheme of things, and more likely to find ourselves approaching it with the reverence that will allow it to become something capable of shaking and shaping our lives, if we dwell not on the order of logic (“Jesus was clearly born before he died, so we must celebrate the one first and then the other later”), but on the order of discovery (“it was because of the death and resurrection of Jesus that it became possible and necessary to tell the story of his life, including the story of his birth”).

To put it crudely: if Jesus hadn't died, been raised from the dead, and appeared to the disciples, there would have been no interest at all in his birth. With most of us, who live and die unheralded and unsung, there will be very little interest in the place or time of our birth. It is only if we “become something” – a great artist or politician – that someone will research our birth, write a biography, and put up a plaque somewhere.

These will not reflect what was known about us at the time of our birth, but will tell the story as of one heading towards becoming a great prime minister, a renowned artist, or the inventor of the galvanised sprocket. The end of the story will determine both whether the story is told at all, and in what light it will be told.

We would have avoided much scandal at the “demythologising” of the infancy narratives a few years back if we had remembered what we should always have known: that the infancy narratives in Luke and Matthew are the reading back, by authors close to the apostolic circle, of elements designed to enrich their hearers' understanding of Jesus' death and resurrection, and what it was that these achieved.

But the infancy narratives are more than mere literary devices. They are the recognition that we cannot adequately begin to indicate what Jesus' death and resurrection achieved unless we see that, largely unknown to and certainly misunderstood by those who knew Jesus in his life, there was a dynamic project at work, which became apparent only after the end of his life.

Jesus, by dying and being raised from the dead, showed that, for God, there is no such thing as death. We do not need to live in the shadow of death.

Jesus did not just happen, as an adult, to cotton on to something interesting. All along, there had been a purpose to his being alive – a purpose not comprehended at the time, and comprehended only gradually afterwards.

That purpose turned out to be the rescuing of our capacity to be the fulfilment of God's creation, a capacity that was so snarled up in us that we did not even know what being created was about.

In telling us the infancy stories, the apostolic group are saying something about what they have understood as the whole purpose of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The desire that was behind it all could be told only by telling the story. After the event, their very capacity to imagine what had been expected was altered, and an open future taught them to re-imagine the past.

But that they did so re-imagine it was not simply an act of piety, let alone a pious fraud. If the apostolic circle had merely borne witness to Jesus's death and resurrection, it might have been understood as an account of a divine thunderbolt, or rescue from a ghastly trap. That would have meant imagining the rescuer relating to creation in a certain way: as one not liking it, not being patient with it, not being delicate with it, but rushing in to sort it out. That would have been the story not of God, but of a god.

Instead, the apostolic witnesses appreciated a vital aspect of Easter. Although it is the story of a violent murder, it cannot be told except as the fulfilment of something very gentle, delicate, and quite immense. It was plan made by someone who likes humans as they are, and wants to involve them – cowards, murderers, liars, addicts of death and security – in becoming something greater than they can imagine.

This delicacy could be shown only in a working-out of the history of Israel, and not in a sudden suspension or cancellation of that history – just as the history of Israel was not a suspension or cancellation of the history of sacrifice and idolatry that it learned to overcome.

This is the importance of Matthew's genealogy, and of Luke's portrayal of a small group of off-centre Jews who can pass, without rupture, into the time of the Messiah. It is a hugely delicate project, worked out over a vast expanse of time, and suggesting, not the power of one who puts things right, but the greater power of one who loves us into being and for whom time is not a concern.

When, at the Christmas eucharist, we hear the words: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light," we would do well not to think it refers to people in the past, and that we are the ones who have seen the light.

Rather, as we are taught by the crucified and risen Lord to understand our own complicity in darkness, and as so we continue with our own gradual, ambivalent steps into living in the light, we are taught by the Christmas eucharist to look back at the project of love that comes into being; to consider the painful birth, in our midst, of a truth (and that means a capacity to learn to tell the truth) which is not ours, and which we would not be, of ourselves, inclined to recognise.

We can come to revere the unexpected and improbable nature of the project, which

we scarcely comprehend now. We can rejoice in the gift we are being given, a gift unrelated to our worthiness or our belonging.

It is a gift whose first sign is the vulnerability of God, in an offstage corner of the world, of which – but for the life which it turned into, and for the lives it turned around – we would never have heard.

Then perhaps, duly Easterfied, we can kneel at the manger.

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