

Christmas Day, year C.

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Introduction

There was plenty of room in the Inn.

Today, for Christmas, we introduce some conflict into the way we read Luke's version of the Christmas story. The way we tell a story — or read a story — is powerful, and can spell the delight or the doom of those people whose lives are narrated in the story. To narrate a story is a role that must be taken with great integrity.

So today, for Christmas, a blessing of hospitality — one that might introduce conflict to your story.

Text

Luke 2:1–20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying:

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Comment

Friends; a Happy and Holy Christmas to you from all of us involved in the project of Spirituality of Conflict.

And for Christmas, we are pleased to introduce some conflict to you — notably a conflict in how we can read the text from Luke’s gospel, that text beloved of Christmas pageants everywhere.

You may have a shepherd in a pageant. You may have attended one in a school or church recently. Or you may have seen beautiful renditions like the one [as told by wonderful small humans from St. Paul’s Church](#) in Auckland, New Zealand, or the [recordings from the early ‘60s](#) of bible stories told by children in Dublin City. They are charming, beautiful. They are full of such potential and pleasure in the art of the imagination.

However, there is a necessary conflict we wish to introduce. The way we tell bible stories is often unfaithful to the text. Luke’s gospel — from which much of the story comes — records no stable, no animals, and, most importantly, no inhospitality. Luke, normally so kind and gracious, giving so much time to stories of the marginalised, rushes through the birth of Jesus as if it was of little importance. Joseph and Mary had gone to Bethlehem for the census (oh, those counting-loving-Romans) and:

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

See? No animals, no inhospitality, no stable. Sorry/notsorry.

There is a deeper story here, one of kind hospitality. And it hinges upon the word used for “Inn”.

The word used for “inn” here is a curious one. In Biblical Greek are two words in Greek for Inn – “*kataluma*” and “*Pandocheion*”. When we hear the word ‘Inn’ we tend to think of a resting house, with an owner, and rooms, kind of like a Medieval hostel where you could rest your horses and get a room for a night.

Luke uses both words for Inn throughout his gospel. When — later in the text — he

is telling the story of the mobbed man who was so helped by the Samaritan, he uses the word *pandocheion* which does indeed translate as an “Inn” — a resting house, with an owner, and rooms.

However, he does not use that word in the nativity story. When the family find out that there is no place in the “inn” the word used is *Kataluma*. A *Kataluma* was a different thing altogether. Most people of the time lived in a one-room structure. In that room there was space for living and sleeping, a fire place. Additionally, the animals were brought in for the night to that same space – for protection and also because of the warmth they’d give. Those houses lucky enough to have a *kataluma* had an additional upper room. This room, the *kataluma*, the upper room, could be rented out, like the ancient world’s equivalent of *Airbnb*.

Joseph and Mary, arriving in Bethlehem, could not find a *kataluma*. They were in Bethlehem because that’s where Joseph’s kinsfolk were. So they had the baby and laid him in the manger. The manger would have been where mangers always were: in the living space of a family, a family who made room for Joseph, Mary and Jesus in their own home. Presumably they were relatives of Joseph.

This is much more ordinary, much less dramatic. And, importantly, this reading is much less offensive to the good people of the Holy Land who are aghast at Western tellings of the nativity story that imply that anyone would turn away any woman — whether kinsfolk or not — in the last moments of pregnancy.

Luke’s story of *Kataluma* continues. At the end of the gospel, *Kataluma* arises once again. Jesus and his friends meet for a meal — a last supper — and this time, he makes it to the *Kataluma*. The word is also translated as “an upper room”.

The way we tell the story tells so much. Stars and angels and joy and delight. Also, inhospitality, cruelty, unintended insult and limitation. We must always be attentive to the edges of our own storytelling. Attractive as it may be to children, and lodged as it may be upon the portrayed scenes of religious Christmas cards, it is simply incorrect to think that Mary and Joseph were forced into a stable. They found shelter in the kindness of people, presumably Joseph’s kin in his traditional homeland of Bethlehem. This kindness was so ordinary, so expected, so taken for granted that Luke, the gentle evangelist, did not even make mention of the family whose home was used for what we consider to be the birthing of a godchild to confused parents.

But, the telling of the story can make many things possible. To tell the story in one way implies something about the character of people in Bethlehem at the time — that they would send a woman to a stable to give birth. It is necessary to introduce conflict into received readings of this story: by doing that, we might realise that every moment of human encounter, every small demonstration of hospitality carries within it the possibility for incarnation. We can see that human touch, the actual touching of flesh and flesh, is in itself sacred. We can also see that religion at its best can communicate an honour for the ordinary, the everyday, the unremarkable – and find something remarkable in the midst of this parochial normality.

We are capable of so many things, us humans. Hospitality and hostility. Kindness and cruelty. What prophet said that? I don’t know. I made it up. If one didn’t say it, one should have said it. It may not be true, but it doesn’t make it untrue.

As a small act of theological imagination, consider what a nativity play — carried out by cute children wrapped in oversized draperies — that portrayed actual *hospitality* might look like. No drama, no foils — just people under occupation doing what people have done for millennia: looking after each other.

Prayer

Jesus of Nazareth
You were born in the home of people
whose names history has forgotten.
Presumably they lent cloths and clothes
to your internally displaced parents.
We bless and honour all
who show hospitality —
they make the message of Christmas
relevant for everyday.
People in shelters, refugees,
people in the welcome centres at prisons,
in the waiting rooms of health centres,
people on streets whose door is always open
for the neighbour who needs a tea and hospitality.
We bless and honour them.
We bless and honour them.
Because this is where you were born,
and are born everyday.
And you
bless and honour them.
Amen.