

May the Word Be With You

A sermon on John 1: 1-14 for Christmas Eve

It is the time of year when we revisit the great stories of our tradition, look for ways to enliven the symbols they embody, listen to the music that has carries the stories, hear again the words that have stirred our hearts and minds. . . . “A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . .” It’s interesting isn’t it how that particular story has captured the hearts and minds of our culture – a young man of uncertain parentage faces off an Empire that wants to conquer and exploit other nations and races. . . . It resonates with another story I know...

I’m not going to do an exegesis on Star Wars, or even on the biblical readings we have heard tonight. I want to pick up on just a few words out of the last reading. I love the beginning of John’s gospel, and as much as love how Nathan brings the bible readings into Australian English, I have to return to a more traditional reading of this verse: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us. . . .” I love the poetry of John’s writing. It carries a mystical quality, like great music, just a few notes, just a few words, and a whole story is evoked. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us. . . .”

Two and a half years ago I did the 30 day Ignatian silent retreat. It was a wonderful experience for me. The main method of prayer is reflecting upon the set Bible readings, putting yourself right into the scene and interacting with the characters, sometimes becoming one of the characters. The readings particularly focus on the life of Jesus, his experience as a man, and the experience of the people around him.

When Nathan asked me to preach tonight I knew I wanted to share with you some of my experience of that retreat, particularly the nativity stories. On the retreat I had to go back several times into the stories, and each time I found myself more engaged. These meditations are my take on the story. They are fiction, a fantasy of my own making. In 1983 John Alexander wrote of fantasy: “Being free of the need to copy reality, fantasy is free to explore a deeper reality—paradoxically, with more accuracy and more care.”¹

I will read you some of my fantasies on the nativity. I am going to paint a word picture, one layer at a time. I know the end result for me is far closer to the reality of Jesus’ birth than any Myer window nativity scene or children’s Christmas play. There are no angels, no heavenly choirs, but lots of ordinary people doing ordinary things. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.”

As I said, I revisit the story from different angles, so we begin with Take 1:

I journey with Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Great mass of people on the move, in all directions. Hot and dusty, walking together. Joseph wondering about the life Mary is carrying, as she does too, love growing between them in their commitment to make this journey of parenthood and family life together. Mary tired and footsore – Joseph buys a donkey for her to ride the last days, as her time is near.

No space in the village, everywhere is full. They go through to the shepherds’ caves on the hill opposite, empty in summer because the shepherds are out in the fields with their sheep. Here is shelter, quiet, private, and they can rest. Mary’s labour begins, Joseph cannot help her, she labours alone, in the dark. She knows what will happen, she was with Elizabeth at John’s birth.

¹ John Alexander, “Bleeding Hearts”, in *The Other Side*, December 1983, p7

But the lonely labouring in the night is hard and her cries to God are heard by Joseph and he too prays for her safety and the new life emerging. As the dawn approaches, her last final cry becomes a sob of joy, as the baby comes. She cuts the cord and wraps him and brings him to her breast where he feeds on her body. Her afterbirth comes away and she marvels at the life that has come from her body, with blood and water. Joseph comes and gives her and the child his blessing, and accepts him as his own. The shepherds have heard the noises, the pain and the cries of joy, and as the dawn breaks, the great chorus of birdsong that greets this event. They come to see the what has been happening delighting and joking about the new life and joy of the parents: a new 'David' born in David's town, thanks to the orders of the Emperor – in a sheep-cave palace!

With the dawn chorus I sing too:

Morning has broken like the first morning.
Blackbird has spoken like the first bird.
Praise for the singing,
Praise for the morning,
Praise for them springing, fresh from the Word!

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us. . .” In 2009 I was in Bethlehem at the beginning of December, before the Christmas crowds arrive. Visiting the Church of the Nativity, revered by many as the birthplace of Jesus was good, but I felt so much more connected to the story of Jesus when I was in the countryside outside the towns, looking at the landscape that shaped Jesus' life. This was particularly the case when we went to the shepherds' caves on the hill opposite the town of Bethlehem. They have so obviously been used to shelter animals for thousands of years. It is the ordinary details and bits of the biblical stories that enlivened this for me.

At the time of Jesus' birth it must have been summer, not winter as is celebrated in the Northern Hemisphere. No sensible shepherd would be outdoors in winter at night. It was summer when you took your flock out into the fields. In winter the caves would have been full of animals and people, together keeping warm. In summer, the shepherd caves, the stable for their animals, was empty. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us. . .”

Take 2:

For my prayer today I walk across to the lower ridge of stones near my cabin, holding the stories of the nativity in my heart. I am drawn to the ordinary details – they walked on stones and grasses too. I come upon a little path (animal or human?) that wanders up beside the rocks. I feel myself with Joseph and Mary walking to Bethlehem, each wondering what the future will bring as Mary's pregnancy draws towards the end. Going through the stories again it is the ordinariness that strikes me. No angels here and supernatural occurrences, but God speaking in the everyday and ordinary events and reactions of humans.

A young girl finds herself pregnant and wonders how it happened – what is she going to do? She is not yet married and there is scandal ahead. She prays and in the movements of her heart and soul, she is consoled by God. She says 'YES' to the life that she carries.

Carrying this life, enfleshing God's will in this way will cost her dearly – her body broken open, her heart broken open, the possibilities of her world broken open – new life coming through her.

Joseph – as Mary labours in the shepherd’s cave wanders down the hill to where the shepherds sit around their fire. They were terrified when they had heard the unearthly noises coming from their caves, a devil must have taken up residence. But when Joseph emerges from the shadows – a bit of a start there – and tells them his wife is in labour the shepherds get very ‘blokey’ and joking around – the relief after the terror. One of them sends a boy to fetch his mother to help the poor woman – no man would dare go near – and they pass the wineskin around and tell jokes.

The local woman does not arrive in time for the birth, but is there soon afterwards, to help with cleaning up the afterbirth and making sure the new mother and her baby are as comfortable as can be in this smelly hole. She runs down the hill to tell Joseph the good news that he has a son. The shepherds all cheer, and throw more wood on the fire lighting up the whole area. They are in full party mode now, and keep telling their great joke of the new king born in David’s city. The party continues to dawn.

Joseph goes to Mary, his heart full of love and blesses her and the new child. It is a mystery to him, but whatever is happening he knows in his heart that he wants to be in it with Mary and this baby, a precious and holy gift from God entrusted to them. I am moved by the ordinary ways in which God moves here in human hearts and emotions, human action and response. It is good to pay attention to the ordinary!

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us. . .” Ordinary people, doing ordinary things, and holding in their story an extra - ordinary reality, a deeper reality. They each have said YES to their situation, to their experience. Our God is with us in ordinary experience and emotion.

Take 3:

Bringing myself into the scenes, as a character in the story. There is only one really for me – Mary. At first I feel hesitant to put myself in her skin – but I ask her and it is ok. (I have in the past asked Jesus to share his experience with me, so it makes sense now to ask Mary to share her experience with me.)

The annunciation – down on my knees, cleaning – sun on my back through the open door, dust mites dancing around me as I sweep. A shadow comes over me and I turn to see a stranger in the door – I cannot see his face – the sun behind him blinds me. His greeting is strange, and his words make no sense. I cannot have a child, as much as I would like to bear the messiah, like every other woman, not without a husband!

He says that God will do it – I am afraid, uncertain what that will mean, but he tells me cousin Elizabeth is pregnant – all things are possible for God.

I feel the power of God in this stranger, and I turn on my knees towards him and place my head to the floor in homage – may God’s will be done on earth as in heaven.

Riding with Joseph into Bethlehem.

Birthing pangs – retreating to the back of the cave where the shepherds have their bed shelves off the floor. Wash myself in preparation with water from the cistern inside.

Sweet smell of the sheep dung and old wool. Pacing the floor with the contractions – labouring alone. The birth, squatting to catch the child as I push him from me. His first gasp of air and cry of surprise as the air floods into his

body. His arms and legs suddenly free of constraint wave in the air. Cutting the cord, the flow of the afterbirth, bathing him with water. His hand grasps my finger and I marvel at his perfect fingers. Wrap him in the bands I have brought. He smells so sweet, his hair so soft on my cheek. Lift him to the breast. He makes little noises of desire and searching that pull my heart strings like nothing ever before. I watch in amazement as he turns at the touch of the nipple and takes it into his mouth. Such a miracle.

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us. . .” I wondered why God had to do that. Why did God come into human experience as a human being? The retreat brought me to focus on ordinary human experience, ordinary human emotions. Why did God enter our world as one of us? It seems to me that the key is our ability to feel emotions, our affective capacity. We feel things, we are moved, we respond to the movements of our hearts. The people in these stories, both in my fantasies and in the biblical narratives were following their hearts. They were sensitive to the ways in which God moved in the world, in their lives, and they responded. They said YES to the unknown, knowing there were risks, and lived into their experience. Jesus was a man, a man who lived his life as fully as he can, following his heart – finding God’s heart in him. Actually, for me the sense is of God finding his human heart – learning the human experience from the inside. As he grew Jesus knew the full range of human emotions – and I think this is what God needed somehow – entering fully into the human experience with all its limitations and griefs and anguish and joys.

God becomes human and brings into himself (reconciles to himself) in Jesus the full range of human emotional experience. I had great sense of surprise at this discovery – discovering God with me in the midst of human emotion. On the retreat one day I had an image of myself as a soldier in battle fatigues, hunkered down and crawling on my belly across the grass, through the battlefield of emotions. I looked over to my side and saw God there with me, hunkered down too, in the midst of the reality of human emotions. Emmanuel – with us, is God. “And the Word became flesh and lived among us. . .”

I came back from that retreat and six weeks later Patrick was diagnosed with Acute Myeloid Leukemia. He died in August this year. It has been a rough ride, full of emotions. I am glad. I say thanks to God for the whole lot. I have learnt that I cannot choose which emotions I will feel, they come unbidden at any time. Joy and grief, laughter and tears. I have prayed throughout it all to be open to life in all its fullness. That fullness doesn’t mean being in a place that has only positive emotions and experiences. I have learnt that it means being open to all of life: the shit, the joy, the anguish, the ridiculous, the despair, the boredom, the grief. Life is full. Life is always full. Jesus lived into the fullness of his life and we know that was no easy ride. We are called to do likewise, to live into the fullness of our own experience, to face life with open arms and open hearts and like Jesus, like Mary and Joseph, to say YES to the mystery and live it fully.

“A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . .”

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us. . .”

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