

A sword will pierce your own soul

A sermon on Luke 2:22-40 by Nathan Nettleton, 31 December 2023

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Message

God reaches out to us through babies and elderly folks with a message of love and redemption that cuts through the theological justifications of empire and warmongering and calls us to peace.

Sermon

You may have noticed that the sermons and messages coming from churches during the Christmas season (which continues until the Feast of Epiphany on January 6th) can be particularly diverse. They range from sentimental cute-baby-in-loving-family reflections through to highly political calls for justice and peace, and everything in between.

This is not only because of the varying viewpoints of the churches and their preachers, though of course that is a factor. But it is also because the biblical Christmas stories themselves are so multi-layered. All these diverse emphases and approaches are there in the stories. No sermon or message can ever do justice to every possibility in any given story, so our different choices about which thread to follow take us in radically different directions.

Take today's gospel reading for example. We heard the story, from Luke's gospel, of the infant Jesus being taken to the Jerusalem Temple by his parents to fulfil the "presentation rite" required by their religion. And while they are there, they encounter two elderly prophets, Simeon and Anna, who are delighted to encounter the baby and make a fuss of him, as people often do with new babies. Or new puppies for that matter.

There is no shortage of material in there for a straightforward sermon about family life, and maintaining your religious practices when a new baby comes, and even the joys of multi-generational faith communities. There is plenty of good news in that, and such sermons are nothing to be sneered at.

But there are other things in this story that could take us in quite different directions. For example, when the old prophet Simeon takes the infant Jesus in his arms and bursts into praise with words which we will sing near the end of our liturgy, and which we sing every night at Compline, he then suddenly feels constrained to say something else to Mary, the mother:

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

All of a sudden, things have gotten way darker. All of a sudden the lovely wholesome mood is broken by foreshadowings of powers rising and falling, and fierce opposition, and devastating heartbreak, and people being found out with their deep dark secrets exposed. Preachers who focus on that are going to end up with very different sermons from those nice family ones. And both types will be equally biblical and equally legitimate.

But what is intriguing me tonight is a message or a picture that I see emerging when I try to keep a hand on each of those poles and try to read them in light of one another, and

especially when I also ask what that might mean in the context of contemporary events. Let me show you what I mean.

In the nice family-friendly take on this story, the heroes of the story are a baby, a nursing mother, and a couple of elderly grandparent type folks. They are precisely the kind of people who are usually kept right out of view when we talk about powers rising and falling, and swords, and deadly opposition, and exposing the inner workings of corruption and evil. Those stories are usually dominated by aggressive men at the peak of their powers.

So what does it tell us when, at Christmas, God's intervention into the world of power and conflict is embodied and proclaimed by a newborn baby, a nursing mother, and a couple of elderly grandparent types? Something new and different is going on here.

One of the things it might tell us is that we would do well to ask why that seems so strange. Why are babies and mothers and the elderly usually so marginalised and hidden when the stories of power and conflict are being presented? Perhaps something deliberate is going on and needs to be brought to light. Perhaps the inner thoughts of many need to be revealed.

You can see this taking place right now in the land where Jesus was born. Let me read you some lengthy extracts from [an article written three weeks ago by the ABC's global affairs editor, John Lyons](#):

There are two wars going on in Gaza right now — the one the Israeli public is watching and the one the rest of the world is watching.

Each evening, Israelis are sitting down to watch their prime-time television news programs to see what happened that day in this war.

And each evening, the pattern is much the same — night after night pictures of Israeli soldiers walking through streets of Gaza; Israeli tanks driving across fields in Gaza; interviews with families of hostages taken by Hamas on October 7; a military progress update ...

There will rarely, if ever, be a picture of a Palestinian. If there is, it will likely be a picture of a Hamas commander. The Palestinians portrayed are terrorists, not civilians who are victims. Watching Hebrew-language TV at night over recent weeks, I've never seen a Palestinian victim of Israel's attack on Gaza.

... Most Israelis do not see pictures of injured Palestinian women and children or the destruction of Gaza into kilometre after kilometre of rubble to the point where it will be difficult to rebuild it.

They will rarely if ever see a child trapped in that rubble, or a mother carrying her dead baby. They don't see the screaming children, or the toddlers who cannot open their eyes.

Israelis are watching a sanitised war. They are not watching the same war as Australians, or anyone else.

... They are bewildered at why the world is increasingly uncomfortable at the high civilian death rate.

It's important that we note this because it explains that Israelis are thinking completely differently about this war than much of the rest of the world. They cannot see the problem with this war continuing.

In terms of sheer numbers, rarely, if ever, has any country killed as many women and children as quickly as Israel is doing so today.

But Israelis are getting no sense of this. They are living in a bubble of sanitised news.

The erasure of babies and mothers and the elderly from the stories of conflict and risings and fallings is quite deliberate. Propaganda doesn't have to involve telling outright lies. It can just be a very selective version of the truth, with all the really troubling truths silenced by erasing the stories of the impact on babies and mothers and the elderly.

I was in Israel this time six months ago. The present war was still three months off, and I felt safe and welcome and had a lovely time. I shared a Sabbath meal in a lovely Jewish home within sight of the old city walls and the Dome of the Rock on the site of the ancient Temple where this gospel story is set. But I knew I was living in a bubble that masked another reality, and it was illuminating to experience how the world looks from within the bubble.

I knew that although Bethlehem was only 10km from where I was in Jerusalem, there would be military checkpoints to pass through if I wanted to go there because it is in occupied Palestinian territory. While I would have certainly been allowed in as a tourist, it would be a different matter for a Palestinian wanting to come out. Israel maintains a brutal system of apartheid, and the rights of Palestinians, include the right of free movement are seriously curtailed. Using the word apartheid is no hyperbole. The system there easily meets the internationally accepted definitions of apartheid, and some black South Africans say it is worse than what they experienced.

But when I was sitting down to breakfast in a fashionable Jerusalem Cafe, or exploring the narrow streets of the old city, it was perfectly possible to be completely oblivious to most of that. It was hidden from view and thus hidden from consciousness and conscience. I completely get what John Lyons was saying in that analysis about how this helps us to understand why ordinary Israelis are bewildered at why the world is increasingly uncomfortable with what is going on in their name.

Add to that a widespread exposure to Zionist biblical thinking that grounds its theology in passages like the one we heard from the prophet Isaiah tonight:

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
and her salvation like a burning torch. (Isaiah 62:1)

When God's vindication of your nation is written into your basic worldview, and the brutal realities of traumatised babies, mothers, and elderly folks are hidden from view and erased

from consciousness, life inside the bubble is largely pleasant and untroubled. I know it; I was there and it was lovely.

But something happened in Bethlehem a long time ago; something called Christmas. God stepped into our midst to untangle the web of lies and self-delusion that keep us entangled in sin and hopelessness. And God did not meet fire with fire, coming as an aggressive powerful ruler to vanquish other aggressive powerful rulers. God's intervention was embodied in a baby, and proclaimed by a nursing mother and a couple of elderly grandparent types. God's intervention came among us fragile and vulnerable like a child caught in the rubble.

But, as the old prophet Simeon suddenly saw, this fragile baby was destined to be the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed.

In the current context, it is illuminating to realise that when Jesus began his public ministry, one of the first examples of him being "a sign that will be opposed" came when he nearly got himself thrown off a cliff for declaring that God was among the Palestinians and Syrians just as much as among the Israelites (Luke 4:16-30). Indeed, "the inner thoughts of many are revealed."

What I am saying about Israel here could just as easily be said about us here in Australia. While we don't have a formal legal apartheid system here, the living conditions and imprisonment rates in much of Aboriginal Australia are similarly appalling, and the only reason that we are not experiencing a crippling crisis of conscience over that is that we too live inside a bubble where the realities are erased from our consciousness and explained away by a mix of bad theology and bad mythology.

But when God and God's action comes among us, embodied in a baby, a nursing mother, and a couple of elderly grandparent types, the myths that justify our sinfulness are shattered, our sinfulness becomes a problem, and our inner thoughts, previously hidden even to ourselves, are revealed.

When that happens, when Christmas happens in our midst, we are faced with a similar choice to the one that faced the good people of Nazareth when Jesus unmasked an uncomfortable truth among them. We can jam our hands over our ears and cling to our belief in our own righteousness and vindication, and seek to push the truth over the nearest cliff, or we can repent and offer ourselves to the new and unexpected thing that God is doing.

We are being called to recognise God's presence, not only in the one baby of Bethlehem, but in every baby that is pulled from the rubble in the Palestinian territories, and in every terrified and grieving mother whose heart is broken and whose child is dying in her arms. We are being called to repent of our own complicity, and to embrace a way of eyes-wide-open love and mercy and peace.

That's got nothing to do with vilifying ordinary Israelis. There is no reason to expect them to find it any easier to exit their bubble than we find it to exit ours. When I spent those days living in their bubble, it felt just like the bubble I live in here at home.

So the path of the Christ-child's love and mercy and peace begins with our own repentance, not with calling for anyone else's. Living that repentance will be a far more effective sign than asserting that the log in someone else's eye is any different from the log in our own. Living repentance begins with holding the inner thoughts of own hearts up to the searching light of the bubble-free truth and asking the Christ-child to lead us into a new world.

And just in case you're feeling that it's too late for you to begin such a journey of change, just come back to this story. The ones who recognised God's presence and proclaimed the good news of what God was doing in this story were well into their eighties. I pray that all of us, whatever our age, might find the courage and integrity to take our places alongside Simeon and Anna and proclaim the love and truth of the new life that is opening before us.