

Fourth Sunday in Advent 18 Dec 2016

[Isaiah 7: 10-16; Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19; Romans 1: 1-7; Matthew 1:18-25](#) from Vanderbilt

[Advent 4A December 18, 2016](#) from Textweek

Both the readings from Isaiah and from Matthew speak of Emmanuel; and Matthew actually points out the meaning of the name in verse 23 as "God with us"; in that same verse so too Matthew reveals the full meaning of his nativity narrative: 23

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

It is not immediately obvious, but Matthew is making a revelation that goes beyond his own tradition, a revelation that still has not been fully realised, accepted or understood.

The reading from Paul in Romans provides an interesting counter-point to the Nativity narrative as he attributes the declaration of "Son of God" not to a story of birth, but rather "*according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead*".

Both the Christmas and Easter narratives are mystical stories that seek to convey something of the Divine nature of life as revealed in and through Christ.

They are stories that tell us something extra-ordinary and that seek to introduce us to a new view of the world and of ourselves.

As we immerse ourselves in the whole nativity narrative and as we encounter Christmas in the week ahead we might seek to discover more of the many layers of meaning that have been blended together to create the nativity story as we know it.

The story of birth, the Christmas story is a combination or blend of the narratives from two of the gospels; Matthew and Luke; and it is important also to note that there is no reference to these is either the gospels of Mark and John.

Once we appreciate that the gospel narratives are not a documentary recording of actual events we can be more fully drawn into a mystical exploration to discover both what the writer intended to reveal, and to discover what might be revealed unintentionally.

By way of example, the Advent star that sits above the snow covered nativity scene on so many Christmas cards is a very deliberate inclusion in the gospel narratives. It would have been included by the gospel writer as it had a "known" significance and so was a readily available cut and paste inclusion to underline the 'special' nature of the birth being described.

And the significance that the gospel writer would have cut and paste into the gospel concerns the Roman emperor; Julius Caesar was the first historical Roman to be officially deified, or declared a God. He was posthumously granted the title *Divus Iulius* (the divine Julius) by decree of the Roman Senate on 1 January 42 BC.; and the appearance of a comet during games in his honour was taken as confirmation of his divinity.

Octavian, Caesar Augustus, also mentioned in the gospels, and the Roman emperor at the time of the nativity setting promoted the cult of *Divus Iulius*; and as the adoptive son of Caesar, assumed the title of *Divi Filius* (son of a god).

And so another layer was added to the nativity narrative that would have given meaning to the audience of the day.

To think that the early Church 'fathers', and even many in the present day church actually understand the Advent star as a physical phenomenon that is a documented reality of a first Christmas borders on the absurd.

However, when we today we explore the whole nativity narrative as a mystical icon, then we can perhaps discover, or ponder, meanings and revelations that go way beyond even the writer's initial intent.

Ever since Adam and Eve were discovered in the garden without even fig leaves the church has been steadily focussed, almost transfixed, at the genital level of humanity; and this has in turn resulted in an attention toward difference.

That focus on difference continues to have implications for all of humanity, it underpins Brexit, stopping the boats and Donald trump's wall building ambitions; it fuels every war, diminishes the role and place of women and divides the Divine oneness of humanity itself.

Religious movements unwittingly built in reminders to reinforce this differential focus and the ritual of circumcision remains as a reminder of such an unenlightened low-level perspective.

The Advent star invites us to lift our eyes and to look from a new perspective. When humankind first ventured out into space, to the place of the Advent star, we saw ourselves differently, as in this quote from Frank Borman an Apollo 8 astronaut:

“When you're finally up at the moon looking back on earth, all those differences and nationalistic traits are pretty well going to blend, and you're going to get a concept that maybe this really is one world and why the hell can't we learn to live together like decent people.” [Frank Borman, Apollo 8,]

The view from the place of the Advent star was of oneness not difference.

As we lift our eyes from below waist level and look to the heavens, so we can also leave behind the old understanding of God having a baby, or of Mary and Joseph having a baby; the immaculate virgin birth is not a genital free story about the arrival of God's boy.

And in the naming of the icon at the centre of the nativity icon we see the true birth that this narrative reveals.

23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

The gospel writers have created a narrative to give understanding to a new reality.

The Hebrew tradition, along with other world religions, located God as an entity somewhere else, and for the Jewish faith, which we inherited, that was 'in heaven' just beyond the stars.

Christ revealed a new paradigm, and the gospel writers painted the mystical icon of the nativity to illuminate this new reality;

"God is with us."

And the "us" is not those in Church rather it is those who were seen by the Astronauts, those held in the perspective of the Advent star; all of us.

Advent asks us to lift ourselves and our attention to a higher order of understanding; we are being asked to ponder a perspective that leaves the old God, and that realises "*God is with us.*"

Such a new perspective changes our prayer life, it will eventually change our liturgy, and more importantly it changes us, for no longer do we wait for another, no longer do we call on another, no longer do we hope, wish and bargain with another.

We discover "*God is with us*" and that changes who we are.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, unremembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;

We are invited to experience the mystical on Christmas Eve and then on Christmas morning we will ponder again, and see the reality that we as the Church has yet to discover.