

Luke's Gospel tells a birth story of one of God's children, the Word made Flesh, that Luke refers to only as "the child" throughout this entire reading. We will learn the child's name next Sunday.

Now, birth stories are powerful. They can evoke memories of vivid, peak experiences for some people, often deeply spiritual. For others, birth stories bring up struggles with infertility or reminders of children hoped for. Some recall birth stories with painfully tragic endings. Still others have heard second-hand the birth stories of children that they have adopted or fostered, or children that they have befriended.

All birth stories are powerful. They capture our attention because every time a child is born, a small miracle is involved. Every child born into this world is one of God's children. I don't say that metaphorically; I mean each one of us is, in every sense of the word, a child of God. We are brothers and sisters of the child in Luke's Gospel.

The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is the traditional site of Luke's birth story. The image on the cover of your bulletin is from the icon hanging just above the altar in the nativity grotto. The altar stands just over a silver star inscribed with Latin that translates into English as "Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary." The floor around the star is paved in marble, and fifteen oil lamps hang beneath the altar. Six belong to the Greek Orthodox, five to the Armenian Orthodox and four to the Franciscans—three of the four religious communities living on-site.

I don't know why the Syriac Orthodox don't get a lamp, but they also live there. This I do know: if and when the monks from any of the four communities allow you inside the church, you enter through a small door—a door so low that you have to bow to get in. Once inside, you can walk past rows of marble pillars down the length of the nave and down a treacherous flight of stone stairs to the altar in the grotto. If you get on your knees, you can crawl beneath the altar and touch the stone just below an opening in the center of the star – the very stone where tradition claims that Mary gave birth to the Christchild.

I also know that there have been repeated brawls among the various monks and clergy over weighty issues like maintaining quiet during each other's prayers and hymns. There have been fights – I mean physical fistfights – over dividing up floor-space for cleaning duties. Several times, the Palestinian police have had to come in to restore the peace.

Birth stories are powerful. And the story about a baby born in the Holy Land some 2,000 years ago may be the most powerful of all. This story is so

powerful that, since the second century, pilgrims have crawled on hands and knees to pray and touch the place where they believe the Christchild was born. This story is so powerful that devout religious people fist-fight over differing expressions of piety. This story is so powerful that we have gathered here this evening to hear it again and to celebrate.

And yet, Luke's *birth* story is not the most astonishing part of what makes this a holy evening.

I will confess to you that visiting the Church of the Nativity was not the most moving moment of my pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I did wait to get in. And I was patient with the Armenian monk who put a hand on my chest at the bottom of the stairs into the grotto. And once he let me in, I did get on my hands and knees beneath the altar to touch a stone that is so thoroughly soaked with devotion and prayer that you can feel it.

I did all that with a heart full of joy and gratitude. And yet...I can't help but wonder if so much emphasis on the baby in the manger leads us to lose sight of a more astounding reality. We are, of course, right to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ and to do so joyfully.

But if we are celebrating *only* the birth-story, we run the risk of taming the mystery out of the *life*-story of the Son of God. And taming God's mystery can tip us down a slippery theological slope into a deceptive comfort. We can start to think and act as though Easter and Pentecost are some distance off in the future; events that happen later, somehow.

There is a certain logic that guides us toward that comfortable and slippery slope. Jesus, so the logic flows, had to be born before he could die, so why shouldn't we celebrate that first event now and the other events later? We do, of course, emphasize those events in the life of Christ over the course of the liturgical year. But we do well to remember that *those* events – Easter and Pentecost – are crucial to what makes *this* event so profoundly and consistently compelling.

Not to put too fine a point on it, but it comes down to this: If Jesus had not been crucified, raised from the dead, and then appeared to the disciples, we would likely have no interest in his birth at all.

Luke knew that. And so, gave us something more than a powerful birth story. This is a *holy* birth story. What makes this story *holy* is that the Word was made Flesh, and that Word is made present again right here with us. The crucified and risen Jesus Christ, the Holy One given for us, is present in our midst at this mass, as at every Eucharist. At this Christ Mass, we celebrate Easter, as do at every Holy Eucharist. And we will leave this Christ Mass, as we

do after every Holy Eucharist, reinvigorated with the Holy Spirit, just like the apostles at Pentecost.

You see, the authors of Luke and Matthew told their infancy stories looking backward, capturing experiences of men and women close to the apostles — experiences that had already happened. Luke and Matthew were well aware of the events that followed the nativity in the life of Jesus. So, in telling about the nativity, they chose elements intended to enrich our understanding of Jesus' death and resurrection. That is what these stories accomplish.

Hearing Luke's story through the filters of the cross and the resurrection reveals the nature of God's love for all creation. We begin to catch a glimpse of *why* the Word of God manifested, and came to live and die as one of us. Luke's story is pregnant with the God's purpose for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And that holy story *has* to begin with a helpless and vulnerable newborn or it becomes a very different story. Luke might otherwise have left us a story about a powerful, impatient god – small “g” – interfering with the world to set things right. Or one about a rescuing god rushing in to magically fix a world that was wrong or bad. These are more like the stories of Greek gods who put up with pesky humans, not the God who loves all of creation into being.

Luke was not promoting revisionist history or simply using a literary device. The shameful death and glorious resurrection of Christ did influence the story-writer's contemplation of the beginning intensely. Luke tells a holy story that recognizes the seeds of God's loving activity in light of the fruit that came later.

All disciples, including you and me, can learn to hear this nativity story as being vitally intertwined with Easter and Pentecost. Fr. James Alison has pointed out that, while the crucifixion was a violent murder, what followed was the fulfilment of something very gentle and delicate, and quite immense. “It was a plan,” Fr. James says, “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.”<sup>1</sup>

*That's* the reason Luke chose to portray of a group of eccentric Jews who found themselves in a tender moment of God's improbable gift of love. A moment in which the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us in a small town at the periphery of the Holy Land. If not for the life that came after Luke's birth-story and the millions of lives that it changed, we may not have heard the story at all.

That same vulnerable gift of love is planted in every human heart, waiting to be born anew in each of us. We are, after all, the people who walked in

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<sup>1</sup> James Alison, “Looking Backwards for Christmas,” *Church Times*, Friday, 21 Dec 2001, 11.

darkness who have seen a great light. We gather in this holy place to give thanks for the light coming into each of our lives just as we are. We come together with all our joys and all our struggles, our wildest love and our most painful grief, our hopes and fears, to coin a phrase. We come to give God all of who we most deeply are and join our voices with the multitude of heaven singing: "Glory to God in the highest heaven."

We come to this table in the presence of the mystery of the Word made Flesh, and then we take it in to ourselves to draw sustenance from it. We revere that spark of Divine light in us and nurture it, so *that* we can give birth to it in the lives that surround us.

This we do, because God first did this all for us in the nativity, death and resurrection of the child we celebrate with gratitude. With Easter and Pentecost echoing in our hearts, perhaps we are truly prepared to kneel at the manger once again with great joy.