

## **Christmas I**

It is a pity that today is the feast day of St John the Evangelist and not the Feast day of St Stephen which was yesterday. Because if today had been St Stephen's Day, I would be forced to tell you an awful joke about Good King Wenceslaus and the feast of Stephen. But I'm going to tell it anyway. We all know that carol about good King Wenceslaus don't we? Well, one day Wenceslaus called the local pizza take away to place an order. "How would you like the base," the take-away asked. "oh," said Wenceslaus, "the usual, deep and crisp and even."

Even though it is the Feast Day of John the Evangelist, I'm not going to preach on him either. Rather about us being midwives.

As a true modern liberal husband, I've been present at the birth of both our children. The first with a doctor, who coincidentally is a lay minister at St Thomas's just down the road, was in the sterile labour of Mowbray Maternity. The second with a midwife that most of you know, Denise Herbert, which happened in our bedroom in our house in Fish Hoek and I had to chase the dog from under the bed and out of the room before the labour could progress; so sterile it was not!

At both births there was Karen doing all the breathing exercises she learnt at her ante-natal classes and there was I supporting her and breathing not so well alongside. Have you ever wondered who Mary did her breathing exercises with two thousand years ago? Whose hands did she squeeze as she pushed her pelvic muscles? Who fetched the water, the towels, the swaddling clothes? Christian tradition was divided on the issue from the earliest times. Early church theologians were quick to defend the virgin birth (as well as conception), but were less sure about Mary (or Jesus) really needing any help.

Yet the second-century book, the Protoevangelium of James contains a remarkable story about the actual birth. Zeloni, a midwife recruited by Joseph, witnesses the virgin birth, after which it is claimed that Mary's hymen still remained intact. Zeloni tells another woman, Salome, who has a walk-on part rather like the proverbial doubting Thomas. Salome attempts her own medical examination of Mary to establish the facts, but as soon as her obstetric enquiry is finished, her hand withers as a punishment. It is healed only when it is placed on the new-born infant. Jesus is working miracles from day one.

Now, in classic Christian thinking, iconography, and paintings, it is usual to see the infant Jesus as the saviour-in-waiting, and to portray the Madonna as a worshipping witness, not as a woman who has just given birth. Even our own manger scene doesn't make Mary appear as though she has just given birth and besides Joseph, no one is there to give any realistic help to the mother and child. Apart from the complicated business of growing up, Jesus' path and destiny is already marked out. The more spiritually alert people - his mother, the wise men, Simeon, the shepherds - all seem to know what is happening. Salvation is coming through this one child: adore-while-you-wait. It will cost God everything, and you nothing. You cannot help God: but he has come to help you. That is the message the birth of Jesus seems to be saying.

Yes, God has come to help us, to save us. But the Gospels hold up for our attention a much more subtle picture. The bringing of salvation to the world turns out to be a task the cost of which is surprisingly shared out amongst many people, not left on the shoulders of one tiny infant. Mary must say Yes: her sacrifice begins at the Annunciation. Jesus escapes the wrath of Herod: hundreds of infants do not. They and their parents pay a heavy price for the coming of the Christ child. Others, such as John the Baptist, lose their lives before Jesus can sacrifice his. God's salvation incurs debts.

There is an old Sunday School mnemonic which says grace is 'God's Riches At Christ's Expense' - G-R-A-C-E. But this is not quite accurate in the case of the grace of salvation. Salvation, even when wholly initiated by God in Christ, is costly for other people too. In bringing heaven to earth, Jesus' sacrifice is not the only one. Like a mother in labour, God cannot do it alone. Even the unknown helpers on the refugee trail to Egypt remind us that God is inviting our contribution from the very beginning.

These are the kinds of correction that can be brought to the notion of salvation that God solely bears the cost and is not in need of any help from human beings. The reason why the Sunday

School aide-memoire, with its emphasis on 'expense' (God's Riches At Christ's Expense) may be a distortion of the Christmas story is that it implies a penalty Jesus pays the price which should have been ours. While that is one way of reading the tradition it is by no means the only way of interpreting the Gospel stories and the New Testament witness.

The Christmas salvation story itself is far richer in meaning. Grace is as expansive as it is expensive. God involves many people in the saving work of 'gathering up all things in Christ' as Paul writing to the Ephesians tells us. God invites human beings to share in the expenditure of salvation and in the distribution of its rewards. We are not only in debt, needing to be 'bought' out of bondage. We are also partners in this extraordinary business, in which everyone can receive a full and equal share in God's riches. This is generosity defined.

Many of the characters in the Christmas stories are studies in Christian virtue, discipline, and generosity. The innkeeper offers hospitality when he is stretched for rooms. Yet he somehow manages to extend his boundaries to be inclusive: nobody is to be turned away. It is very like the ministry of Jesus, very like the mansions of God. There is room.

The wise men bring strange and extravagant gifts, speaking of a foolish generosity so rarely found in monarchical power, but especially bestowed in God's. The shepherds mirror the spontaneity and searching of Christ: you may find him, but he will come looking for you anyway. The people of Egypt, too often unsung, support and sustain the unlikely asylum seekers. The gospel may in the end cross all borders and boundaries, but Jesus the refugee is first received in a foreign land. Small wonder that as an adult, Christ will preach on the importance of welcoming the stranger.

At the feast of the Passover, it is a Jewish custom to spill some of the wine as a reminder that the cup of joy at the escape from Egypt, is not filled to the brim, let alone overflowing. In order for the Israelites to go free, many Egyptians perished in the Red Sea, and they are God's children too. Similarly, the salvation that comes through Jesus can also require others to make sacrifices, even without their knowing the significance of what they are doing or of what is done to them. There are few of us who can passively receive the Christ-child. To accept him can often involve us in accepting a loss. God's riches may come at our expense too. Yet in saying that, one is whispering 'yes' to the invitation, making room for grace to grow, and making some space for the infant in our own stable.

God, even in coming to save us, reaches out to humanity to the extent of being partly dependent on us, so that we can begin to live the message even before we have fully heard and received it. This is God's true wisdom: coming to us not as someone who does not need our help, but as a helpless child who reaches out to us. The Christmas story is as much one of us being midwives to the Christ child, as it is one of theology. So this coming new year begin living the message of Christ, become a midwife of that message, delivering it to those who are in labour and anguish.

Based on an essay by Martyn Percy in *Darkness Yielding* (Canterbury Press:2009)