

JESUS COMES BRINGING PEACE



KATHLEEN RUSHTON draws attention to how the story of Jesus's birth in Luke 2:1-20 challenges our domesticated Christmas images and ideas.

We have many popular stories and images of Christmas – all moving and much loved – but we can set these aside to read the Luke 2:1-20 story reflectively. What do we see, hear, feel? What moves us?

Luke tells of the birth of Jesus in two verses (Lk 2:6-7) which are surrounded by Old Testament associations and theological strands concerning this newborn. I will draw on Michael Trainor's *Earth Bible Commentary* on Luke in exploring these associations, namely, God's word-deed (*rhēma*), the "inn", the "manger", "wrapped in cloth strips" and the shepherds.

God's Word-Deed

In the Genesis creation story, and in words of prophets, when God speaks, creation happens. God spoke: "Let there be light", there was light. The infancy narrative links the coming birth of Jesus on Earth with the creating Word of God through the term *rhēma*. To keep the sense of God's word, which speaks and brings about in material form

what is spoken about, *rhēma* would be better expressed as "word-deed".

Usually, we hear the angel's last words to Mary at the annunciation as: "For nothing is impossible with God" (Lk 1:37). That translation loses the significant link with the biblical creating Word of God. Raymond Brown translates the angel as saying: "*Nothing said (rhēma)* by God can be impossible." Mary, too, acknowledges the creating Word of God when she responds: "let it be with me according to your word-deed (*rhēma*)."¹ What is about to happen to Mary is an act of God's word-deed.

The shepherds, having seen "this word-deed (*rhēma*) which has happened", go to Bethlehem. They "spoke publicly concerning the word-deed (*rhēma*) that had been spoken to

CHRISTMAS

Both RL (Midnight and Dawn) and RCL (Eve, Morning and Midday) have verses from Luke 2:1-20.

them about this child” (Lk 2:15, 17). Most likely they return to “keeping watch” over their sheep. Mary “kept all these word-deeds (*rhēma*) pondering them in her heart” (Lk 1:19; 2:51). Both “keeping watch” and “pondering” suggest care, nurturing and sustaining which all are called to do for people and Earth.

The “Inn”

Imagine Joseph and Mary journeying with families of peasants and labourers. They’re on the move for political and economic reasons. The couple are travelling to Joseph’s family city of Bethlehem to be registered in a census which would decide what taxes will be imposed on them by the Roman administration. While popular Christmas stories include an inn and innkeeper, Luke focuses on place. For Mary and Joseph “there was no place in the lodging area”. The earliest hearers would know that a guest house was where elites stayed. No place there for peasants! Socially, they did not belong.

If Joseph had family there, they would stay with kin. What is the significance of place? Is Luke inviting us to go deeper? Is Luke inviting the well-to-do of his Christian community, and Christians today, to consider those among whom Jesus cast his lot – the poor and outcasts? Is the Christian community being called to conversion? Maybe, after all, the lodging area of the well-to-do, the wealthy and the powerful was not a suitable place for the birth of this child.

The Manger

The manger is mentioned three times in the story (Lk 2:7, 12, 16). The manger points to the life of Jesus and to an ecological connection. It is a place of life, nurture and food. Food, meals and the place of eating will feature significantly in the public ministry of Jesus. Through his ministry of hospitality, the isolated and socially-excluded are welcomed.

We can set aside the dainty wooden centrepiece in a crib set. There is archaeological evidence of only stone mangers in Jesus’s time. Usually peasant houses had only one room. (In Mt 5:15, the one lamp gives light to the whole house.) The family lived and slept in this one room which was often raised. Animals occupied the other end of the room which sometimes consisted of a cave up against which the house was built. The manger was placed between the two ends. It would have been the usual place for peasant births.

The manger links Jesus to the land, the human and the other-than-human worlds. The child is at home in these worlds. The manger, like Mary’s womb, is a place which receives the body of the child.

“Wrapped in Cloth Strips”

There is reference to the child wrapped in cloth strips twice. At first, the focus is on Mary who “wrapped the child in cloth strips” (Lk 2:7) to complete the tasks of traditional afterbirth care. Later, the clothing of Jesus will be touched for healing (Lk 8:44), become dazzling white at the transfiguration (Lk 9:29), and Herod will clothe him at his trial (Lk 23:11). A linen shroud envelopes his dead body (Lk 23:53) and it is discovered by Peter after the resurrection

(Lk 24:12). The cloth Jesus is wrapped in links him with the Earth, as clothing then was made from natural products materials such as flax, wool and cotton. The wrapping and placing of the newborn body of Jesus in the manger, mirrors what will happen to his dead body – it will be wrapped in a linen cloth and placed in the tomb.

A child wrapped in cloth strips is a part of the sign in the angel’s message to the shepherds (Lk 2:12). This is an action done to Jesus. This is what God does to Jesus. Jesus is wrapped in space and theology beyond the human household to the heavens and the cosmos.

Shepherds

The focus shifts from city to countryside. The shepherds “were in the open fields keeping watch at night over their flock”. They, too, received good news from an angel. They are not to be afraid. The message (Lk 2:10-14) has five elements: it a message of joy for all people; the birth of the Saviour is the reason for the joy; this Saviour is the awaited Messiah who is in the “city” of David; the sign is that the baby will be wrapped in cloth strips and lying in the manger; and because of his birth, God will receive glory and peace will come upon the Earth.

The shepherds are of lowly social status. Often unrest existed between them and peasant farmers depending on whether available land was plentiful and fruitful. They were all reliant on the relationship between the human and creaturely worlds. Sheep were valuable for many reasons. Stories throughout the OT show they provided food, milk, wool for clothing and tent coverings. They were also a significant part of the system of religious sacrifice. They were a source of wealth, livelihood and security.

Jesus Connects

Jesus’s birth outside conventional places of hospitality shows his connection with the land and the people. His birth in a “city” brings together urban people. The manger, associated with the peasant farming households, represents the rural poor. Mary, Joseph and the shepherds represent the landless.

Heaven and Earth come together in this birth. These cosmological spheres, known to Luke’s readers, are affected and come together. The whole inhabited creation is involved. Having heard God’s sky messengers, shepherds witness and validate Jesus’s birth on Earth. While the Gentile world during the *Pax Romana* regarded Emperor Augustus as the prince of peace, Jesus comes as the One bringing peace. We might still hold dear our Christmas stories and images of Jesus’s birth. But there is room to add to them by reading Luke attentively – witnessing Jesus’s birth anew through fresh eyes. ★

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