

St James – Christmas morning

Back in October I spent some days looking after my grandchildren when they had a week off school. Mostly it was uneventful. But on the morning I was coming home we were doing some art work when Charlie who is four had a glitter incident. The top came off the shaker and the glitter went everywhere. We did our best to clear it up but as I left there was still glitter on the table, the carpet, both children, and the dog. When I was on the train home the man with the coffee trolley treated me with that careful patience normally reserved for people a bit out of the ordinary and I realised that I had also been marked by the incident.

I am doubly indebted to Charlie this morning, or more accurately to Miss Hennessey who cast him in the role of a shepherd for his first nativity. Because I had missed the play he treated me to a cameo performance of his one line. 'But Bethlehem is very big. How will we find them?'

This advent I have been reading a book by Paula Gooder about the nativity. In the introduction she reminds readers that our images and traditions of the nativity are often spoiled by New Testament scholars who point out that much of those traditions has no biblical base. They might be happy to strip the story bare of the stable, donkey and the inn-keepers wife leaving only a crowd of angels, a baby in a feeding trough and some shepherds. If you think you might be a New Testament scholar you may feel uncomfortable with what follows.

Our individual pictures of the nativity may be formed over many years and based on nativity plays and carols as well as the bare bones of a story in Luke's gospel. . My personal view of Bethlehem has been very much of the 'little town'. Not of somewhere so big, that finding the baby could be difficult. In a place where after dark few households could afford lights, locating a baby in an unusual setting should not be that hard. Charlie has forced me to think again. To re-explore where my image has come from and question its validity.

All the people in the nativity story are greatly touched by the events of that night. The shepherds were so astounded by the angel's message that they ran off leaving their sheep alone on the hillside to the mercy of wolves and other predators. Such was the impact of the message. Luke doesn't actually tell us how the shepherds explained their visit nor does he tell us what Mary and Joseph shared of their experience. But it is hard to imagine that they did not discuss such amazing things with the shepherds during their visit.

The shepherds went about telling everybody what they had seen and heard. Mary pondered them in her mind. They were touched by the events of the first Christmas. In Luke's economical account this is important enough to be mentioned. Both Mary and the Shepherds were left marked by the events of that night.

Last week I did a Christmas present run to Charlie and his sister. I couldn't help but notice that there were still tiny bits of glitter twinkling up from the carpet and the table. That one glitter spilling event has had a visible and lasting impact.

We all carry the lasting impact of Christmas. Maybe as a vivid memory of our first acting role, from doing a reading at the Brownie Carol Service, from our own traditions and experiences. They have formed our own personal storyboard. Sometimes when I have read today's gospel I have been disappointed that there is not more detail, less left to the imagination. But then there would be no space for my grandson, 60 years my junior, to nudge me into re-exploring an event of 2,000 years ago, the story of which I have heard all my life. Instead of the living story that we have it would be set rigid and without the magic of rediscovery.

Over the years that I have been involved with our Journey to the stable we have had a variety of people play the part of Joseph. There have been robust Joseph's, gentle ones, thoughtful ones and most commonly nervous ones. Twice we have had the Holy family played by three generations of the same earthly family. I suppose I have a slight preference for the thoughtful Joseph's but the point here is that they are all equally valid based on the scant information included in the Gospels. So not only are we receiving different pictures of what took place we are sharing our pictures with others helping to form their own interpretations of the story.

Most of us here today belong to an age before nativity plays featured lobsters or kangaroos, when angels dressed in their fathers' shirts and all tea towels were striped. We learned the Christmas story at school, at home, at our grandparent's home and at Sunday school. This has allowed us to build our own unique picture of what happened in the build up to that night and afterwards.

How fair are we if we deprive today's children of that experience? If we don't invite them also to explore the nativity story through its different interpretations.

We have been lucky enough to be touched by the Christmas story. As with the glitter once marked it is almost impossible to remove all traces, to remain completely ambivalent to such an amazing event. The light of Christ came into the world and shone in the manger, initially for Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, but continues to shine for us all. It would be selfish of us to keep this to ourselves and we still have opportunities to share the joy of Christmas with others, to re-explore for ourselves the detail of the story, to spread some of the sparkle like that which fell from Charlie's glitter pot.

Don't worry about the scholars but flaunt the joy, bring out and share the sparkle of the living story of the Son of God coming into the world – our greatest Christmas present.