

Composite, complicated story

Advent 1 Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44 Rev J Shannon

We are beginning to enter the Christmas story and it is a little like an Aladdin's cave. We are surrounded by dangly themes like hope, peace, love and joy. Our memories sparkle with the glitter of childhood Christmases. Traditions that were born from our grandparent's cultures are embedded like raisons in our family's fruitcake celebrations. They are inseparable from the whole; adding textures and flavours and smells that spark memories. The soundscape is a mixture of stories, a murmuring 4 Gospels that tell different tales. Narratives layered with a world of customs brought into our homes and orchestrated by music from the middle-ages to Maria Carey. The secular and sacred are entwined so that no one can tell the difference. We are rapt by ribbons of green and red and sparkling consumerism.

Matthew has no nativity, no manger, no barn but has a star the wise men follow. Mark's gospel starts with the Baptism. Luke is the first to mention no room in the inn but does not say Mary gave birth amongst the animals but simply that she lay the baby in a manger because there was no room at the inn. Luke gives us shepherds and angels but no wise men. John follows no pattern of time – he starts with a cosmic beginning and the mission and doesn't mention a birth at all.

The Christmas story is a composite of imagination, tradition and the sparse Gospel stories elaborated by centuries.

Why? Because as humans we harvest the message of hope and we need to explore the very ground it blossomed from. God gave us the gift of imagination and Jesus used it in his teachings. Why wouldn't it be human nature to explore and celebrate a beginning? Hope is fruit – Christmas is the seed we plant every year. And from hope, we cultivate peace, joy and love.

I want to look at some of the traditions and meaning and ask you what traditions your family have celebrated in the past. But first,

I took a step back and asked my colleagues how their churches celebrated Advent over the years. Here are a few stories:

Many of my fellow ministers have abandoned the Christmas wreath for other forms to illustrate the passing weeks.

The drought inspired many water ceremonies as water IS life and we had so little of it. Instead of lighting candles, they had tube vases set on the altar and in the bottom a little drop of food colouring. Each week, when the water was added, the colour would rise and swirl and ultimately integrate. It was like watching the spirit rise in all of us – AND it was safe to leave on the altar until the next service.

The Advent wreath dates back to the middle-ages. It signifies everlasting life, eternity. It means that the birth and death of Jesus is not the end. John 3:16,

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

For us, it is not just the 4 weeks of Advent but that we will do it again, and again – we revisit hope, joy, peace and love. We are reminded of the virtuous cycle.

That's why we have the colours of Christmas red and green. The red represents the blood of Jesus as he died on the cross and green is the colour of everlasting light and eternal life. That why we use evergreen trees.

Some churches use the plays and stories from *The Lost Sheep* or other professionally developed resources. Many feature nativity stories that emphasise the refugee-ness, the political oppression and the danger from which Hope is born. Some have a women's focus where we are made aware of the pain and discomfort birth can bring from which we get such hope and joy in our new born babe. It is a reminder that almost all good comes from painful experiences.

You can imagine the pageants of European nativity, the candles and gold, the glitter of costumes and warm mull wine in the darkness of a snowy winter. You can imagine at time when people hunker down behind closed doors, close to their fireplaces, the church would call them out in community, activity and celebration.

I heard the story of a church that constructed an enormous star out paper mâché and glitter. It trailed ribbon tails like a comet. They strung it up in their worship space. Each Saturday, they moved the star so the congregation were forced to follow it.

The best stories were from churches that covered their buildings with lights and make a spectacle of themselves. When the neighbours came to gaze, they

found the congregation dressed as wise men and fairies, Herod, Mary and Elizabeth, shepherds and yes, some in plain clothes with their name badges. They roamed through the crowds and engaged with families.¹ It was a circus but one that involved everyone.

All this talk brought about some reminiscing. I listened as they described their Christmases past. So much of what we remember flavours our experience of Christmas today.

When I was very young our Christmas was like a fairy story. We had a huge tree. We roasted chestnuts on an open fire and strung popcorn and made paper chains. I now realise it was my older sisters and brothers that probably created that experience. Maybe it was their imaginations or perhaps we had a critical mass of children. As they grew up and one by one, they left home, we moved to the suburbs. My Jewish grandmother protested at the tree so my mother bought a silver aluminium thing and hung blue balls on it. She called it a Hanukah bush. Christmas was not the same after that. Seven years later, one of my older sisters died and we never had another Christmas.²

But I still remember, so many wonderful things. Our European roots showed in our stockings which would have oranges, sultanas and nuts. These were things treasured in a harsh European winter and even in a land of abundance, we children thought they were marvellous. The food on the table was a blend of all the cultures each generation had lived in. I will always attach the smell of spruce, oranges and cinnamon to Christmas.

The readings today ask us to wake up – to be alert and so I am asking you, right now, to rise from your slumber. As part of waking up to the season, tell me about your special family tradition. The joy you remember from childhood.

(Space for people to tell their stories) (Ed's note- we had some war, some funny and some sad stories)

Christmas is not the beginning or the end. The texts remind us that the baby born in Bethlehem fulfils the promise of the Hebrew scriptures but as Christians, we remain in Advent because of the promise of something more: The coming of the Son of Man. Celebrating Christmas gives us hope and it also means renewing the promise and standing ready to welcome God's

¹ They had talking points and hints on how to play their characters. And yes, they had a roster.

² 23 years later, after my mother died, all my brothers and sisters including me from Oz, got together for Christmas Day.

consummation. The birth of a baby gives us the symbol of the same hope and promise we make every Sunday.

Ours is a complicated, composite story. It is a blend of Old Testament and New; imagination and tradition. It predates and post-dates Christianity. It belongs to both the secular and the sacred.

Hold your memories tightly. Decorate with enthusiasm just as a mother prepares a nest before birth. Traditions are the seeds that spring up every year. Water them so that they renew your faith that His day will come again.

Advent 1 calls us to be awake and alert....to everything.

Let it be so.