

Ember Days – A Marcan Nativity

1. Introduction:

The imagery of the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke's Gospel has so taken hold of us that we can scarcely imagine Christmas without the imagery they provide. As a result, the earliest Gospel, Mark's, looks deficient, which is why we supplement it so heavily during the seasons of Advent and Christmas, even during the forthcoming 'Year of Mark' (Year B in the Sunday lectionary). Perhaps, however, we're missing out. Perhaps a Marcan Christmas could help us to see the feast (and our preparation for the feast) in a new light.

2. Making A Beginning:

So where to begin? There is no Genealogy, tracing Jesus back to Abraham via David (as in Matthew), no apparition to Zechariah (as in Luke), neither a pregnancy nor explanation of the pregnancy. There simply is John the Baptist in the wilderness and Jesus joining John the Baptist in the wilderness. But first there is a title: "*The beginning of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God,*" and a Scripture quotation: "*As it is written in the Prophet Isaiah ...*" Actually, Mark slightly bends the quotation, adding a line from the Prophet Malachi; then changing the word order to move the focus from building the road to the solitary voice of John the Baptist, standing in the wilderness, preaching his fiery Gospel. But in Mk 1.1-3, Mark already tells us what he is about: firstly, *euangelion*, Gospel; secondly, fulfilment of Hebrew Scripture; thirdly, the theme of the coming of "*Jesus Christ, the Son of God*". That is the theme of the whole Gospel, in a mixture of understanding and misunderstanding. Peter's confession: "*You are the Christ!*" (Mk 8.28) is taken up by the Centurion at the foot of the Cross: "*In truth this man was Son of God.*" (Mk 15.39) And the strange broken ending of the book leaves us with this question: will we take up this faith and live by it? So the whole of the Christmas story is contained in Mk 1.1-3, even though Mark would scarcely have understood the theological term, '*Incarnation*'; nor John's statement in his Prologue that "*The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us*". Indeed, what a great title Mark offers for Christmas itself: "*The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God ...*" Not only the twelve days of the Christmas feast but the whole of the rest of our year is dedicated to the unpacking of that simple phrase.

3. Where is Bethlehem?

Mark's Jesus is 'born' already an adult. Jesus simply appears in the queue for baptism on the banks of the River Jordan. Perhaps we should consider the wilderness to be Mark's 'Bethlehem'. It is, of course, the place of temptation; but it also the place of Israel's 40 years of Exodus journey, the place of purification and the place of the encounter with God, hence Mark's statement that it was the Spirit who drove him out into the desert and the concluding line: "*He was with the wild animals, and the angels looked after him.*" (Mk 1.13) This is the nearest we get in Mark to Luke's choirs of angels. Not even in Gethsemane do they return to comfort him. Mark's true 'Bethlehem' might equally be considered to be Capernaum, the setting for the first day of his ministry. This is his starting-point, and perhaps also historically was his base. So, just as with Matthew and Luke, in Mark Jesus is torn from his place of origin, Nazareth. Indeed,

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Mark does not speak of his ever having returned there after his baptism (except, presumably, in Mk 6.1). After the Resurrection the disciples are sent back to Galilee to meet the Risen Lord (Mk 16.7). But in Mark's presentation, "*going to Galilee*" denotes the beginning of Jesus' own ministry (Mk 1.14). Thus, after John's arrest, Jesus both inherits and transcends John's mission.

4. Meet The Family:

We meet Mary, but never Joseph in Mk – which is just what you might expect from western Christian tradition, which remembers him as an older man and yet dying young. However, Mark seems to go further than this in Mk 6.3: why in so strongly a patriarchal culture is Jesus "*the carpenter; the son of Mary,*" and not the son of *Joseph*, especially given that Joseph was a carpenter? (Mt 13.55 and Lk 4.22 both correct Mark.) Is it simply a reflection of the fact that Joseph was long-dead? Or is it a recollection of the embarrassing notion (reflected in Mt 1.18; Lk 1.34) that Jesus was conceived out of wedlock, thereby causing scandal – however innocent Mary might be in the matter (as Christian theology insists)? *Mary The Single Mother* is worthy of further reflection. Tradition suggests she faced long years of widowhood. Perhaps it was at Joseph's death, when Jesus was around thirty, that Jesus 'went on the road' with his Gospel message, or maybe Jesus had already assumed the place of head of the family and chief breadwinner, having learnt his trade from Joseph (cf. Jn 5.19-20). Did she, too (with the other women of Lk 8.1-3) share in the discomforts of his journeys, before she stood at the foot of the cross? And, when she discovered her pregnancy, did she (innocent though she be) know the fear of the woman taken in adultery (Jn 7.53-8.11) – the possibility of a denunciation and public stoning (or private honour-killing) – until Joseph took her home to be his wife?

In any case, Mark gives us enough to make us realise that the Holy Family was not like our nuclear families. Jesus is surrounded by 'brothers and sisters' (presumably cousins - including John the Baptist, according to Lk 1.36). Jesus' family, like every family in the Middle East, was a clan. It's first priority would have been safeguarding the family honour, which is why in Mk 3.20-21 they show up to take him away, convinced he is mad: "*And looking around at those sitting in a circle round him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother.'*" (3.31-35)

5. The New Holy Family:

That, I suggest is the appropriate text for our Feast of the Holy Family in Year B. The Holy Family is no longer based on blood-relationship. We are that family, as brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers – and we are so not on the basis of baptism but simply *insofar as we do the will of God*. The boundaries are changeable, wobbly, messy. We can come into the clan and we can drift away again, according to how we live. And we may find we have some surprising companions at table – both sinners and all those ritually impure people Jesus welcomed into his company, together with others who have long-since 'counted themselves out' from the Church. "*Since Christ died for all, and since all men [sic.] are in fact called to one and the same destiny, which is divine, we must hold that the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of being made*

partners, in a way known to God, in the Paschal Mystery.” (Vat II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n.22) That is why Jesus came, to create communion and to heal division. That is what Christmas is about, this new community of the Kingdom of God. It is seen firstly in the choice of the Twelve (Mk 3.16-19) – and what a bunch they are, if you examine the list, bringing together enemies and very different social and cultural backgrounds in one rumbustious mix: “*to be his companions and to be sent out to proclaim the message, with power to drive out devils.*” (3.15) “*I call you not strangers but friends,*” as John’s Jesus says. It is ‘being with’, relationship, which has priority. Mission flows from that. And the power to drive out devils, however we understand this, also derives from the message, rather than being an independent wonder-working gift.

6. Shepherds, Magi, Herod And A Donkey:

So there are shepherds in Mark’s Gospel. They are not, it is true, found on a Bethlehem hillside (although those ‘ritually unclean’ shepherds might have been suitable invitees to Jesus’ table-fellowship). They are the ones who have left everything to follow Jesus; the ones who took up their cross and followed him; the ones who, in time, come to view the crowd as Jesus views them at the Feeding of the Five Thousand, with compassion (Mk 6.37).

Can we also find Magi in Mk? Not wise men from the East, certainly (despite Mk 15.39), but Magi moments, perhaps. Only one pagan enters into the story in Mark, namely the Syro-Phoenician woman who challenges Jesus (Mk 7.27), but that is more of an epiphany for Jesus than for the reader (since Mk 7 presumes the presence of Gentiles in the audience, explaining Pharisee regulations for their benefit). The true moments of Epiphany come at Caesarea Philippi and on the Mountain of the Transfiguration – in Peter’s still uncomprehending, “*You are the Christ*” (Mk 8.28); and in the heavenly voice reprising what was said at Jesus’ baptism, for the benefit of the three disciples and Mark’s audience (Mk 9.7; cf. 1.11). Not the cloud and the transfiguring light but the emptiness afterwards (Mk 9.9) constitutes the Marcan Epiphany, the realisation that there is only Jesus, only one Master to follow, only one way to go – carrying the cross, going to the Cross and thence to the empty tomb.

Mk reports no ‘Flight into Egypt.’ Herod the Great had been dead for thirty years, yet his family and the threat to Jesus’ safety they represented do find a little echo in Mark’s account. Herod’s son, Antipas, was the ruler of Galilee at this time, denounced by John the Baptist (Mk 6.17-29) and warned against by Jesus (Mk 8.15) And it was the Herodians who conspired with the Pharisees to bring Jesus down, both at the beginning of the ministry (Mk 3.6) and near its end (Mk 12.13-17). As in Mt, the Christ lives under threat of death from the first days of his existence.

So, finally, the donkey (actually absent from both Infancy Narratives, even if the evangelists might have intended allusions to asinine texts (Num 22.22-35; 24.17; Isa 1.3): you don’t *quite* get a donkey in Mk, but “*a tethered colt that no one has yet ridden,*” (Mk 11.2) and you get it not at the beginning but near the end of the Gospel at the entry into Jerusalem. Once again,

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Mark offers us an uncomfortable take on the familiar imagery of Christmas, recalling the line in *The Journey of the Magi*:

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but set down
This set down
This: were we lead all that way for
Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I have seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.*

We are led to the truth which Luke expresses through the prophecy of Simeon. Here is indeed: *“a light of revelation for the gentiles and glory for your people Israel,”* and yet, *“he is destined for the fall and for the rise of many in Israel, destined to be a sign that is opposed – and a sword will pierce your soul too – so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare.”* (Lk 2.32, 34-5)

7. **Conclusion – An Uncomfortable Nativity:**

So we could have a true Year of Mark, complete with a Marcan Nativity, a celebration of the Incarnation which depends entirely on the earliest Gospel, if we dared. But maybe it wouldn't sell well. It might frighten away the punters on Christmas night. The pretty snow of Nordic Christmas legend is swept away. There is something far colder and harder here. Mk gives us the vulnerability, not of a new-born but of a dying man, the one whom Mark confesses as the Son of God, left hanging on the Cross in despair, crying out to his Father – or, perhaps we should say, to himself (Mk 15.34); laid then not in a Manger but in a buried tomb. This Nativity is about the words that Jesus says to the first four disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee and to Levi at the tax office and to the Rich Young Man: *“Follow me.”* *“His face fell at these words and he went away sad, for he was a man of great wealth.”* (Mk 10.22) And yet Mark dares to call this rupture with the past ‘Good News’. This is where true happiness will be found this Christmas, as any Christmas: not with tinsel and presents and what Bishop Kieran called on Sunday, *“comfort-eating on a different scale”*; but in hearing Jesus' invitation and promise and ‘leaving behind’ what is unnecessary: *“Looking around at those sitting in a circle round him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my brother and sister and mother.’”* (Mk 3.34-5) And if we preached (and lived) that Gospel of discipleship and companionship, we might just be surprised by the response of the crowd, dazed and confused as they are in this time of hardship.